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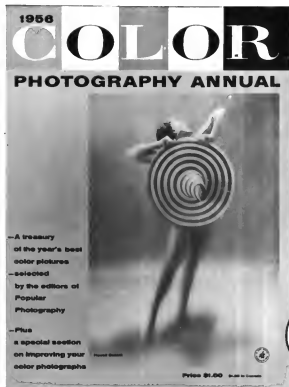
THE THING FROM UNDERNEATH by Milton Lesser

BEST SCIENCE FICTION

AMAZING STORIES

JUNE, 1956 VOL. 30 NO. 6

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BY THE EDITOR

We live in some pretty woodsy country about seventy miles north of New York City. And upon any summer afternoon, the Old Resident—there's one in every community—will take you into the hills and show you the spot behind a big rock where the moccasin tracks of long-dead Iroquois Indians can be seen just as plain as day.

Which is no doubt a rather sneaky way of leading into this "think-piece" as Billy Rose used to call 'em. But if the footprints of the Iroquois Indians still exist, it follows that on some sheltered and secluded stretch of old Western trail, the wagon tracks of the Forty-Niners may still be in evidence.

From this point, we hop back to New York City and a poster we saw in the window of an air-line office:

"AFTER THEATER" PLANE TO LOS ANGELES!

See the latest hit-show on Broadway. Have a leisurely dinner afterwards. Then board the After Theater plane and wake up rested and refreshed in Los Angeles at 6 a.m. the following morning.

We'll pass over the point as to whether a person can wake up "rested and refreshed" at 6 a.m. on any morning and consider the broader aspect of this travel innovation: A commuting DC-6 casting wing-shadows over the wagon tracks of the Forty-Niners. Think of it. One hundred years during which all the fairy tales came true in a Cinderella world that would have rocked the minds of the ancient tellers of tales. The Magic Carpet of Araby. What a childish concept of the fabulous reality it foretold! And poor little Aladdin with his miserable lamp. His genie-slave was a blundering amateur when set be-

(Concluded on page 130)



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The ROSICRUCIANS
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Fort Knox is impregnable. Everybody knows that. Everybody, that is, except the guy who stole eleven bars of gold right out from under the noses of the guards. But wait a minute! Maybe it wasn't a guy at all; nor a gal. The gold couldn't go out the doors nor up through the ceiling. All possibilities had been considered. But there was—

THE THING FROM UNDERNEATH

By MILTON LESSER

CORPORAL Joe Grange was assigned to Fort Knox the day after the first bar of gold disappeared.

On the bus with Joe were two F.B.I. agents, a Colonel of Army C.I.D. and a grim-faced Under-Secretary of the Treasury, all bound for the fortress from which, miraculously, a bar of gold worth forty thousand dollars had disappeared. Joe didn't miss any of the excitement: he was a sleepy-eyed, slow-speaking, deep-south-looking, freckle-faced young man who, on appearances at least, was never taken very seriously. That was the general idea, for Joe was a

member of Army Counter-Intelligence. As such, and even though he held the rank of corporal, Joe could out-rank every other investigator on the scent of the missing gold—when rank was necessary. Until it was, though, Joe remained simply Corporal Joe Grange, attached as a photographer to Headquarters Fort Knox Public Information Office. Nobody, not even the Fort Knox Commander, knew that Joe was a Counter-Intelligence agent.

The Public Information Office was crawling with civilian reporters when Joe got there. The theft of a bar of gold



He sensed the unknown menace lurking below.

from Fort Knox, naturally, was big news. It was the story of the year and somehow it had leaked out almost immediately.

Missing: one bar of gold.

Thief: Unknown.

Method of theft: unknown.

Time of theft: unknown.

Likelihood of apprehension: nil.

This was the report which reluctantly left the hands of the Public Information Officer, a Major Spoonley. It was the report which had all the reporters buzzing when Joe got there and the report which sent them scurrying around the Fort looking for answers on their own.

Lieutenant Anders, Chief of the Photography Section, told Joe, "Corporal, you sure checked in at a hell of a time. I tell you what, if there's nothing doing over at the dark room, why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off? The Spoon is in no mood to have pictures taken—which sure as hell isn't like The Spoon, but what the hell, gold bars don't get stolen every day."

The Spoon was Major Spoonley. Joe nodded, tossed a stiff highball at his immediate superior, and returned to his barracks. Headquarters Detachment was special troops mostly, and Joe got into a

poker game with members of the Fort Knox band for a few minutes, playing long enough to establish the fact with the enlisted men that he was a slow-talking, slow-thinking, slow-acting photographer. During the game the topic of the gold theft came up. It seemed to amuse the daylights out of Fort Knox's musically talented soldiers. The Fort, they pointed out, was absolutely impregnable—not that it had been attacked. The Fort, they added, had a staff security system that would leave J. Edgar gasping: every worker who came within proximity of the gold was searched daily. There was no way in and no way out, except under the scrutiny of guards, who themselves were watched by watchers who watched one another.

In short, the gold could not have been stolen.

A second gold bar was missing on the day Corporal Joe Grange arrived.

And two on the next day.

And three on the day after.

Reporters were herded off the base. Visitors' passes were suspended. All personnel leaves were cancelled. No one off the base was allowed on and no one on the base was permitted off.

And four gold bars disappeared the very day this order became effective.

Eleven gold bars, worth forty thousand dollars each. That was almost half a million dollars in pure gold, a sum which—naturally—the U. S. Treasury would hardly miss. But it meant that Fort Knox was not impregnable. It meant that, theoretically, the gold reserve of the U.S.A. might be drained off several bars at a time by some unknown thief, stealing in some unheard of way, from a Fort which was absolutely burglarproof.

On the day of the first really big theft, Joe met Harriet. She was Harriet Fuller and she was a Wac P.F.C. and she typed and mimeographed the Fort guard roster which daily augmented the M.P. guard patrols with sentries from Headquarters Detachment. With The Spoon's blessings, Joe was taking pictures around the Fort for a magazine spread on the robberies. It was either Joe, or a civilian photographer, so the civilian photographer remained in Lexington, enjoying the fruits of his expense account, while Joe did the work.

"Smile," Joe told Harriet, sighting her through the Graphic's finder. She said cheese and added, "What's it

for?" and Joe told her about the civilian magazine and she said she thought he was new here and Joe admitted he was.

"You won't believe it," Harriet said, "but Knox is usually a kind of sleepy post where nothing ever happens."

"I guess you're right, I won't believe it," Joe drawled, and smiled. Harriet was easy to smile at. She had a breath-taking figure, although you had to guess at much of it thanks to the camouflage of the Wac uniform. She had the healthy, scrubbed good-looking face and the blonde hair of the Dutch you find around Reading, Pennsylvania. She didn't look too bright, but she didn't look stupid either.

"That's all you do," she asked, "take pictures?"

"Well, it's enough for me," drawled Joe, as if any little thing would be enough for him. Then, abruptly, he added, "Lunch?"

"All right, corporal."

At which, they exchanged names. Lunch in the PX cafeteria was pleasant enough. They talked about each other and about the gold theft, and Harriet knew as little as anyone. Over coffee Joe said, drawling and innocent:

"You know, you could do me a favor."

"I'll be glad to, Joe."

"I know I just got here, so it will be a while before I pull guard duty, but—"

"Corporal of the guard, you call that guard duty? It'll be a lead-pipe cinch."

"Anyhow," said Joe, "you won't believe this, but I'm eager."

"For guard, you mean? I'll tell you a secret, Joe: I've already been bribed by a few guys."

"Is that so?"

"Sure. They're just like you, curious. Since it's impossible to steal anything from Fort Knox, but since gold has been stolen, they want to go prowling around and see what's what."

"That's the general idea," said Joe, delighted that it hadn't been his idea alone. "Me, too."

Harriet studied his face a moment, then nodded. "Naturally, this is on the Q.T.," she told him. "I could get myself in a sling for even thinking of it."

"Naturally," said Joe.

The Corporal of the Guard's small office was located a dozen strides down the corridor from one of the big vault doors that led to the underground vaults housing the gold. Actually, there were two Corporals of the Guard, one

from the MP's and one from Headquarters Detachment. Tonight Joe was the Headquarters man, complete with white helmet, white carbine sling, white cartridge belt and leggings. He had loaded the carbine and locked a round in the chamber, as prescribed. He had made a quick tour of the guard duty posts while the MP corporal did a little gold-bricking. All the guards were present, all their posts secure. At the F.B.I.'s suggestion, their numbers had been augmented by the State Police, one trooper for every two MP soldiers. And one or the other of the two F.B.I. agents here at the Fort would duplicate the Corporal of the Guard's duty. In short, although the possibility of someone forcing his way into the vaults had always been nil, it was less than nil now.

"Everything O.K.?" the MP yawned.

Joe nodded. Everything, he had to admit, was too damn O.K. There didn't seem to be a weak spot in the guard network. Hell, of course there wasn't, yet the gold was missing. "Think I'll take another stroll," Joe said.

"First duty, huh? Eager. You won't find nothing."

Shrugging, Joe went into the corridor. It was lighted al-

most as bright as day and a guard was stationed at every entrance and exit, although all these were locked. "Inside job, corporal," one of the soldiers joked. "I knew it was them F.B.I. men all along."

"Or the Post Commander," said Joe, going along with it.

"Or the Preserdint of the United States," said the guard.

Joe grinned, inspecting the soldier's rifle only half-heartedly. A single M-1 didn't seem very important in the face of what had been happening. The thieves, whoever they were, hadn't stolen the Fort Knox gold by overcoming any guards. They had stolen it by circumventing the guards, by entering through an unguarded area. Which, Joe told himself for the tenth time, was impossible. For there were no unguarded entrances to Fort Knox.

"Or Harriet Fuller," said the guard. "Man, what a piece!"

"You know her well?"

"Well, I—"

"I hear she can arrange guard duty for you out of turn," Joe said on impulse, and wondered if he would regret it for Harriet's sake.

"Aw," said the guard.

"No, really."

"I didn't mean nothing,"

the guard protested almost paranoically. "Guy I know over to Headquarters Detachment said my name was popping up any day on KP roster. But I foxed 'em, pulling guard instead."

"With Harriet's help?"

"Aw, I ain't supposed to tell."

"With Harriet's help?"

"Yeah. Aw, so what?"

Before Joe could answer, a voice cried: "Corporal of the guard! Corporal of the guard!"

Joe sprinted in that direction, his boots slapping loudly on the stone floor, unslinging his carbine as he went. Overt trouble, for the first time? His heart raced. He hoped so. He had absolutely nothing to report so far. . . .

Two guards were stationed before the vault door, an enormous round steel door which wouldn't yield to a charge of TNT big enough to blow a destroyer out of the water. Or, two guards should have been stationed there. Joe saw only one.

The soldier's eyes were very big, very round, and full of terror. He was trying to stand at parade rest before the vault, but his knees wouldn't quite support him in the necessary upright position. His

hand on the M-1 barrel was trembling. Sweat beaded his forehead and got in his eyes and made him blink. He stared at Joe very solemnly and some of the terror left his face. He said two words. He said,

"In there."

"In there?" Joe repeated. "You mean, in the vault?"

"In there, corporal," the guard said, and nodded slowly.

"Well, what about it? And where's the other guard?"

"In there," said the guard.

"But that's impossible. You couldn't open the vault even if you wanted to."

"From the outside, you couldn't," said the guard stubbornly.

Joe frowned. "Now, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Five minutes ago," said the guard in a frightened voice. "We was standing here, me and George. Just like me an' you're standing here. It don't make no noise. It just opens a little, slowly, kind of an inch at a time."

"What does?"

"The vault door," said the guard.

"Now, wait a minute!"

"I was here," pleaded the guard. "I seen it with my own eyes, corporal. It opened slow. . . ."

"But it's on a time mechanism. It can't be opened except

by the timer, even if you wanted to open it."

"From the outside it can't," said the guard.

"You mean it opened—from the inside?"

"Got to be that way, in case somebody accidentally gets hisself trapped inside. Poor slob might starve to death before the timer got him out, so he don't have to wait—if he's on the inside."

"Nobody was inside there and you know it."

"I'm tryin' to tell yuh," said the guard, his southern accent coming thick once more as terror crawled back into his eyes. There and then Joe decided to let him talk, although what he had heard of the story sounded incredible. There was something about the guard's eyes. . . .

"All of a sudden, George's face goes white. George is like that, see? George can blush like a beet if a pretty girl much as grins at him, or George can go white as chalk if he's scared. Well, George was scared. I look behind him, and there's the vault—opening."

"George points. He don't say nothin'. He don't have to say nothin'. He just points. A inch at a time, the vault is opening. I looks at George but George don't look at me; he

can't get his eyes off of that door, I'm tellin' you. Well, it keeps on opening while George is watchin' an' I'm tryin' to git my heart from stickin in my throat so as I can holler.

"Then," the guard finished quickly, gazing about fearfully, "it comes out and grabs George and goes inside again. Lord!"

He looked at Joe. He shook his head. He was still sweating.

"What came out?" Joe asked. "And you mean, out of the vault?"

"Yeah. Out of the vault. George, he's still in there."

"Tell me what you saw. It's very important. Tell me what came out."

The guard shuddered. He clutched the barrel of his M-1 and his knuckles were white as bleached, fleshless bone. "Well," he said, his voice hardly hardly more than a squawk now, "it didn't come all the way out. Just far enough to grab George."

"What? For crying out loud, what was it?"

"All I saw were the arms."

"A man's arms?"

"N-no."

"Not a woman's?"

"No, corporal."

"Well," Joe said after a si-

lence, "are you going to tell me?"

"They was green, corporal."

"What was green?"

"The arms was."

"Wearing green clothing, you mean? Green sleeves?"

"Nakid, corporal. Scaly-like. And green."

"The arms?"

"The arms. They reached out and took George in there."

Joe said, "You realize what you're saying? You'd repeat it under oath?"

"On a stack of Bibles."

"And you weren't drinking?"

"Not me," said the guard.

"George? Was he drinking?"

"George?" the guard laughed for the first time. It was a strained sound and it seemed to frighten him. "He don't drink at all, George don't."

Joe went to the vault door, tugged at it. He grinned, then shook his head. It was like a flea trying to move a grand piano. He lifted his whistle to his lips, feeling the slight pull of the lanyard around his neck. Leather against flesh, something he could understand. He wished it wasn't the only thing he could understand. Because he considered himself a good judge of human character and had al-

ready decided that the guard was telling the truth—at least, what he *thought* was the truth.

Joe blew the whistle, and waited. When a relief guard came pounding down the corridor, Joe told him, "Get the O.D. This is urgent."

Five minutes later, the Officer of the Day came trotting down the corridor. He was a first lieutenant, pink-cheeked and baby-faced, with a petulant mouth but the hard, arrogant eyes of the R.O.T.C. officer who considers himself infinitely superior to all enlisted men, most regular officers, and all civilians.

"Well?" he said. Everything looked very peaceful. His eyes said: whatever your story is, I don't believe it.

Joe said, "There are usually two guards on this post, lieutenant. One of them is missing and the other one's got a story to tell. I think you ought to hear it."

"Naturally," said the O.D. condescendingly, "or you wouldn't have sent for me. Go ahead, soldier." The O.D. wore finance brass. The brass was very bright; his uniform starched and immaculate. He had probably been, Joe found himself thinking, a wolf scout.

He listened while the guard

repeated his story. He did not interrupt, as Joe had interrupted when his credulity was taxed. But his hard eyes became bright with suppressed laughter. He was thoroughly enjoying himself and trying not to show it, at least until the story was finished.

Finally, when the guard had lapsed into nervous silence, the O.D. looked at him and looked at Joe and said only two words. He said, "Green arms?"

Joe shrugged. The guard nodded solemnly before the O.D. told Joe, "Corporal, in the future please don't summon me on such obvious fabrications. That's why you're here. You're supposed to be adult enough to deal with them." He chuckled. "Green arms."

"You're forgetting one thing," Joe said.

"Corporal, really—"

"A man is missing."

"Didn't it ever occur to you that his buddy is trying to cover for him because he slipped away from guard duty without permission? Didn't it, corporal?"

"Cover for him—by shouting for the corporal of the guard? You tell me, lieutenant."

The O.D. grunted something under his breath, then

asked for the missing man's name. He took it down without much interest, told Joe he would report it through channels and was about to leave when the guard said:

"But, suh! He's in there. He's in *there!*"

"Address your remarks to the corporal, soldier. He'll forward them to me—when they merit it."

"But suh—"

"That's enough," snapped the lieutenant, and acknowledged a pair of salutes half-heartedly, turned on his heel, and marched away down the hall.

Joe told the guard, "I'll send a couple of relief men, soldier. You've had enough for one night. But listen, fellow: if you change your story, somebody's name is going to be mud."

"Don't worry about me, corporal," the guard promised. Ten minutes later, the relief came and Joe returned to the Corporal of the Guard's office.

The next day, George was listed as AWOL. He wasn't the only one: Harriet Fuller also was absent without leave, this despite the fact that the base had been sealed off with all gates barred and watched. Joe could make nothing of it, but knew that the two events

were not necessarily connected.

Meanwhile, the guard's story went up through channels and was known to the Chief of Intelligence, the Post Commander, the C.I.D. Colonel and the two F.B.I. agents by the time the vault timing mechanism was to open the vault. Joe was given a routine interrogation by the Intelligence Colonel, a Colonel Fullbright, who seemed a sensible man. Nevertheless, Joe did not reveal his identity as a Counter-Intelligence agent, mostly because there was no indication as yet that Counter-Intelligence was needed. Colonel Fullbright could hardly accept the guard's story, but did not reject it outright as the O.D. had done.

"Remember the Brinks case," he told Joe. "Halloween masks! Maybe it's green arms this time. Who knows? Who knows, corporal?" Abruptly he asked, "Do you know anything about P.F.C. Fuller?"

"P.F.C. Fuller? Oh, Harriet Fuller. I had lunch with her once. I don't know much about her, sir."

"Where's she from?"

"Pennsylvania, I'd guess. Why?"

"Because somebody's face is red in personnel, corporal. I oughtn't to tell you this, but

you know as much about what happened last night as anyone and I think it's a good idea for you to know whatever's pertinent."

"What is it, sir?"

"Personnel has no Form-20 card for a Wac named Fuller, Harriet."

"Colonel?"

"You heard me. As far as personnel is concerned, Harriet Fuller does not exist. That's a problem for the Wac detachment, isn't it? If she doesn't exist, how can they list her as AWOL? But it's a bigger problem than that, corporal. Who is Harriet Fuller? Is she really a Wac? Then why haven't we a record of her assignment here? And if she's not a Wac, then why the masquerade? You see what I mean, corporal—a first rate problem."

Just then a master sergeant entered the office and said, "Vault timer's set for ten minutes from now, colonel. You wanted to be told, sir."

The colonel thanked the sergeant, and dismissed him. "Well, you'll have to excuse me, corporal," he told Joe. "I'll have to be going down there right away."

"I'd like to come, sir," Joe said. "I mean, to get the rest of the story."

"Rather irregular, don't you think?"

"But you said—"

"Bait, boy!" beamed the colonel. "You're not just a corporal of photography, are you?"

"I want to go down there, sir."

"Well, are you?"

Reluctantly, Joe showed his identification. The Colonel's face sobered and he said: "C.I.C., eh? I thought it would be something like that. They figure it's a job for Counter-Intelligence in Washington?"

"Not necessarily. They want me here, just in case. And Colonel? I wish you wouldn't reveal my identity. An Agent works better if—"

"I understand," said the intelligence officer, and Joe respected him for it. Often, G-2 officers saw red when they saw C.I.C. operatives. But the Colonel seemed cut from a different bolt of cloth, almost as if he were relieved to have Joe working with him.

"You'd want to come downstairs, of course," he said.

"Of course," said Joe, and they went down together.

The enormous vault door swung open at precisely 3:04, as scheduled. The Post Commander, the G-2 Chief, the two F.B.I. men, the C.I.D. officer, the Post Provost Mar-

shal, their aides, and Corporal Joe Grange, Counter-Intelligence Corps, were on hand.

What they saw was to make headlines all over the country—and the world—that night.

The vault—one of fifteen at the Fort—had held half a billion dollars in gold bars. This made it the smallest of the vaults, but half a billion dollars was a lot of money, even to the U.S. Treasury.

There was no gold in the vault when the huge door swung open.

The shelves were empty, but there were streaks and splinters and smudges of dull yellow on the floor where some of the heavy bars had been dragged across it.

There was a hole in the center of the floor.

A perfectly round hole, four feet across. It went down. It was very dark inside. The dragging marks led toward it. On the lip of the hole were two uniforms, a soldier's and a Wac's. The G-2 colonel's aide, a second lieutenant, rushed to the uniforms and went through the pockets for identification. One belonged to a private named George Murdock. The other, the Wac's uniform, belonged to Harriet Fuller.

General Brandon Burress,

Post Commander, had a normally red face. It was redder now. "Gentlemen," he said slowly, distinctly, gazing at the perfectly round hole which led to blackness in the center of the floor of the empty vault, "Gentlemen, Fort Knox is an impregnable fortress, as you all know—except for entry from one direction. No one ever considered that direction any kind of a threat. That direction, of course, is from below. Gentlemen, you all see it with your own ideas: we have been invaded from below!"

Invaded, naturally, was an overstatement, and brought a deflating remark from Colonel Fulbright. "Yes, sir," he said, "invaded by men with green arms."

"Now, colonel!"

"Well, sir, I don't know if their arms are green or not, whoever they are. But this is not an invasion. It's robbery."

"Half a billion dollars," said one of the F.B.I. men, softly, devoutly.

"What's half a billion!" the C. I. D. Colonel thundered. "Don't you understand what this means? If they attacked here, they can attack any of the vaults the same way. Of course, we can station guards in each one, but in the first place we won't be able to do that until the timing mecha-

nisms open them and, in the second place, look what happened to these two guards here."

"Only one of them was a guard," the Provost Marshal was quick to point out.

"Visited while on duty by his girl friend? That's even worse."

The argument might have gained in intensity, but Joe said: "What about the hole? You gentlemen each have your area of interest—but what about the hole? Who's baby is that?"

"Being responsible for the security of this post—" began the Provost Marshal.

"Investigating the theft of gold from Fort Knox—" began the C.I.D. colonel.

"I'm Agent Grange of the C.I.C.," Joe admitted reluctantly. "My rank is corporal, but as you know I can assume the rank and privileges of any officer up to and including full colonel. Therefore, with General Burress' approval, I'd like to take over this investigation—for the C.I.C."

"But why Counter-Intelligence?" demanded the Criminal Investigation Detachment Colonel, passionately believing that his own province was being invaded.

"I'll tell you why," Joe said.

"Because the mere theft of gold isn't what's really important..."

"Mere theft!" snorted the Colonel, but his G-2 counterpart said:

"Hear him out, will you?"

"We all have our jobs, don't you see?" Joe said. "Provost Marshal, to safeguard the rest of the gold. G-2, to double-check every employee and soldier on this base. C.I.D. to assume responsibility for investigation of the theft itself."

"What about the Bureau?" one of the F.B.I. men wanted to know. "Where are they slated to fit in, sir?"

"I don't know about the Bureau, but I'm all alone here and could use some help. Now, the reason Counter-Intelligence ought to take over is an easy one. Whatever came through the hole, wherever it came from—don't you see? If it can enter Fort Knox it can also enter White Sands proving grounds and Brookhaven and Oak Ridge, and who knows where else? We've got to find out what it is and how it got here and who it's working for, and find a way to stop it. And that's a job for Counter-Intelligence."

The others expressed their doubt, but General Burress said, "That makes sense,

Agent Grange. You talk, they'll listen."

"Thank you, sir," said Joe. He took a deep breath and plunged in. "First off, I want the post engineer summoned. I want a thorough study made of the hole. Look at the edges. They haven't dug mechanically! they're perfectly smooth." He got down on hands and knees near the lip of the hole. "They look almost fused. I'm no engineer, but they look like they've been heated. Well, don't they?"

No one said anything. They were all listening breathlessly. Joe took a pen-knife from his pocket. "Everybody watching?" he said. "Let's get some idea as to its depth, shall we?"

General Burress nodded. The others crowded around. Joe dropped the pen-knife, and they waited. The seconds fled reluctantly. Someone cleared his throat. The C.I.D. colonel cursed softly. An awed look came to General Burress' face.

No one heard the pen-knife strike bottom—if there was a bottom.

"We'd better get the post engineer," Joe repeated.

This time, there was practically a race to the door to carry out his wishes.

Before noon on the follow-

ing day, a post engineer report was forwarded to Colonel Fullbright's office. It was typed in the standard Army subject-to form, beginning—

Subject: Hole of Unknown Origin. Vault 15. Fort.

To: Richard Fullbright. Colonel. AG. G-B.

The Colonel read it while Joe waited politely across the desk from him. The Colonel grunted once or twice, and Joe watched the pattern of wonder made by his thick eyebrows. Finally, without a word, the Colonel handed the report across the desk. Joe all but pounced on it.

The report said many things, in inconclusive Army jargon. The report was of such a fantastic nature that no one wanted to put himself out on a limb calling a spade a spade. The hole, said the report, had been bored by no known method. Bored, it suggested, was the wrong word. The hole, apparently, had been caused by great heat: the granitic and metallic rocks at its lips had been fused, and such fusion could not occur ordinarily under the heat of friction alone.

The hole, said the report, went down to an indeterminate depth. It suggested, however, that instruments adequate for measuring the

depth were lacking. It gave the dimensions of the hole and reported traces of gold on the lip. It made no suggestion as to the nature of the hole's origin. All this was interesting, but the bombshell came last. The bombshell said:

Controlled dropping of articles of various weights had been attempted. These articles did not fall in accordance with the laws of gravity. This was worded as if the violation of said laws was somehow punishable by the code of military justice. But the fact remained: gravity was violated. The dropped objects, permitted to fall freely but attached to ropes so their speed of descent could be measured, began by falling at the theoretical speed. Then they slowed—and slowed. By the time they reached the end of their recording ropes (the longest were five hundred feet) they were drifting downward slow as feathers borne on a faint breeze. This happened to every object dropped—without exception.

"My God," said Colonel Fullbright softly. "What does it mean?"

Joe shook his head. "Anti-gravity, colonel. We don't have it, but that hardly means no one does."

"But anti-gravity!"

"Well, look at it from the pragmatic point of view. If the gold were merely dropped down there—wherever down there is—those bars would splinter. So, they rigged up anti-gravity and then—"

"But Joe! Merely because something is needed doesn't mean it's going to be invented. Necessity mothered a lot of things, but this. . ."

"Besides," Joe went on, unperturbed, "there's the Wac, and George Murdock. They went down there."

"They might have fallen."

"First taking their clothing off?"

"Can you explain why they stripped?"

Joe shook his head. "No, but it probably means they didn't fall unexpectedly. Colonel, someone ought to go down there."

The Colonel's eyes widened and he said, "You mean, just sort of fall in?"

"No. I mean on a rope. On the longest rope we've got. If he's still falling fast when the rope is all played out, he can yank at it and be drawn up. But if he's not falling at all and if there's something down there that needs exploring, he can just unfasten himself and keep going."

Colonel Fullbright lit a cigarette, inhaled and let a long

plume of smoke out toward the ceiling, and shook his head. "This is the G-2 Section, Joe, but I can't ask any of my men to do that."

"I'm not asking you to," Joe said softly.

"I don't understand what you mean, then."

"I'll go down there myself, colonel."

"But you—"

"Someone ought to. It's what I'm paid for."

"But there's no telling—"

"I've made up my mind, colonel. Have Post Engineer rig up some kind of a pully device in Vault 15. I'm going down, yes; but if I want out in a hurry, I'll want to know it can be done."

Without a comment, Colonel Fullbright got the Post Engineer on the phone. But he was shaking his head slowly from side to side while he made the necessary arrangements.

All set, fellow?" a captain of engineers asked Joe an hour and a half later. The captain stood near a winch around which a five hundred foot length of sturdy rope was winded. The played-out rope had been fastened about Joe's middle in such a way that he could get rid of it in seconds if he had to.

Joe was standing on the lip of the hole, looking down. He could see nothing, as before, but felt compelled to look. He wore a combat uniform, helmet, green herringbone-twill fatigues, trooper boots, a slung carbine and a .45 automatic, and a cartridge belt for the carbine's .30 caliber ammo around his waist and one for the .45 across one shoulder like a bandolier.

"I still think you ought to take a walkie-talkie," Colonel Fullbright said.

Joe shook his head. "Too heavy. Too encumbering. I want to be able to look around."

"If you can see anything."

"Well, I've got this flashlight." It was a big three-battery model and it hung at Joe's left hip, balancing the .45's holster on his right. "I feel like a one-man Army," he said, and grinned.

No one grinned back at him. Everyone thought they were seeing Joe Grange for the last time alive, which was hardly the sort of thought worth grinning about.

"Remember now," the Captain of engineers was saying, "we let you down slowly. No rush. Slowly, we speed it up. According to what we found yesterday, that shouldn't be possible. That is, even if we

speed your descent, whatever anti-gravity agents exist down there should serve to slow it proportionately. You understand?"

"Yes," Joe said mechanically, dutifully. Now that he'd made up his mind to go down, all this delay, all these explanations, seemed patently unnecessary. He stood at the edge, looking down. The sides of the hole were silvery, but the depths were black. He could not see very far.

"It may or may not be bottomless," said the Captain. "As you know, we haven't attempted to send anything beyond five hundred feet. As for sonar—" he looked at Colonel Fullbright, who shrugged. "As for sonar, we get a confused picture. One theory: there is a bottom, hardly more than five hundred feet down, but somehow it's masked."

"Well," Joe said as if it hardly mattered, "if they have anti-gravity they also could have some kind of anti-echoing device which swallows up the sonar without letting any of it bounce back."

"Do you think so?" the Captain challenged pedantically.

"I'm going to find out," Joe said.

He shook hands all around, wishing the formalities could be dispensed with. He did not

know if he were afraid or not. A strange lassitude always gripped him in the face of danger, but he knew it was deceptive. It was a lassitude out of which he could spring into violent activity, when the occasion demanded.

"And for God's sake," Colonel Fullbright said, "if there's any kind of trouble at all, give a yank on the rope and we'll withdraw you."

Joe nodded, and stepped to the very edge of the hole. Then he threw Colonel Fullbright an informal highball, and stepped into nothingness.

"He went without a word," Colonel Fullbright told the Captain of Engineers unbelievably.

"I saw him, sir."

Fullbright watched the slow, steady unwinding of the winch, watched the inch-thick rope being played out into the hole. "How deep is he, Captain?"

"Fifty-five feet. Still going."

"Fast?"

"As fast as I'll let him. If there's any anti-gravity down there, I'm not aware of it."

Fullbright swore softly, wondering if Joe would admit defeat and have himself drawn up. "Depth, Captain?" he demanded, pacing uneasily.

"A hundred feet."

"Falling—?"

"As fast as I'll let him. There isn't a thing slowing him down, sir."

"Is it safe?"

"Reasonably, but only because we've got the winch acting as a brake."

"Umm-mm. Depth?"

"A hundred sixty-seven. Still going."

"Let me know every fifty feet, please."

"Yes, sir. . . . Wait a minute!"

"What is it, Captain?"

"The rope. It isn't checking his fall, sir!"

"You mean he's falling out of control?"

"No, sir. I mean he's slowing down—of his own accord."

"Anti-gravity," said Colonel Fullbright, and breathed easier. "But how can you explain it?"

"I can't explain, sir. I can only report it. . . . Two hundred and fifty feet. Why sir, you could walk a straight line as fast as he's falling."

"That's incredible," Colonel Fullbright said.

He had no idea how deep he was now, but knew he was moving slowly. He could not sense the motion at all, and became aware of it only when he switched on the beam of his flashlight and saw the

glazed walls moving upward slowly.

For the first few moments, though, the rope tugged almost painfully at his middle. This was a pretty good gauge of the gravity, he knew. It meant his hundred and seventy-five pounds were pulling downward with all their weight. Then, suddenly, the tugging was gone. Almost, he couldn't believe it. He reached over his head, pulling at the rope. It was barely taught now, as if something were pushing back from below, slowing his fall. He switched on the light again and was surprised to see the walls disappearing upward at apparently the same rate of speed, until he realized that the rope had previously been checking his fall and so his rate of drop had not altered.

All at once, he wasn't falling. Five-hundred feet, he thought. He'd come to the end of his rope, and it wasn't figurative. He dangled there—over nothingness. He pointed the beam of his flashlight down, and it was swallowed by darkness. Slowly, he spun back and forth like some lag-gard pendulum in the few feet of room he had. For, down here, the hole was wider—ten feet across perhaps.

Cut the rope?

The thought occurred to him. There was nothing else he could do. He didn't think the rate of fall would increase again, but his only indication of that was the fact that Harriet Fuller and George Murdock had come this way before him, apparently of their own free will.

But the sonar didn't clearly indicate a bottom.

He smiled. That meant next to nothing, and he knew it. Whatever invisible force counteracted gravity might absorb sonar echoes as a side-effect. Still, once he cut the rope, he was completely on his own. There would be no turning back—

Which hadn't seemed to bother Murdock and Harriet.

He toyed with the bayonet which they had given him. All he had to do was place the edge, honed almost razor-sharp, against the rope, and apply pressure. He'd drop clear and—

And what? He didn't know. But dangling here he wasn't going to find out. He smiled grimly, trying to imagine Colonel Fullbright's shock when he was told by the Captain of Engineers that the rope had suddenly gone slack. He hung there, swinging slowly, and checked the magazine of his carbine and the clip of his .45.

He hardly knew why. The weapons seemed almost superfluous. Bullets, in the face of anti-gravity!

But anti-gravity hadn't stolen the gold bars. Anti-gravity had made the theft possible. The bars had been stolen by—by whom, he thought. People with green arms?

Green arms?

Somehow, the thought annoyed him—and called for action. With one deft motion, he cut the rope. He barely felt the strands part, for their pressure was very slight now. But his pendulum motion ceased and he became aware of drifting gently downward. Without his weight at the end of a rope to keep his fall straight, he found himself drifting back and forth, bouncing gently as a feather from wall to wall. It was the oddest sensation he had ever experienced, and he had no doubt about anti-gravity now.

And then, abruptly, he reached bottom. He fell easily, softly, rolling once and coming to rest against the fused wall. It was almost completely dark, although directly overhead a faint patch of light—from the Fort Knox vault far above—shone down on him. He got up and switched on the flashlight.

On three sides of him, blank wall, gray, silver-mottled, glazed almost to the polish of glass. On the fourth, a passage! It cut out at right angles to the tube through which he'd dropped, forming the base of a letter L for which it was the stem. And deep within the new passage, so faint that he had to cut the flashlight's beam to assure himself he actually saw it, was light.

Almost jauntily, he set out down the passage. He tried the flashlight again, and received another surprise. For these walls seemed different. They were not glazed, but rough-hewn from the soft rock. And somehow Joe got the impression that they were very old, and quite possibly a natural rock formation. After all, the soft Kentucky bedrock was honeycombed not infrequently with caves and caverns, from gigantic Mammoth Cave on down. Had Joe stumbled on the outskirts of a cave system which might extend for miles into the subterranean rock? He hardly knew—but knew he was going to find out.

He stumbled on an outcropping suddenly, and fell forward. All he suffered was a scraped knee, but when he tried to light the flashlight afterwards, it would not

work. Up ahead, though, the unknown light seemed brighter, and the loss of the flashlight hardly seemed important.

Shrugging, Joe went ahead.

"I'm hungry," George Murdock said. The light was blue. From head to toe he looked a pale blue color. "We've been here a long time already," he complained. He was utterly naked, but it was warm in the cavern.

Harriet Fuller, who also was naked and who sat a couple of paces from him, said, "Stop complaining, will you? Take a look at yourself, why don't you? We haven't begun to change back yet, have we? We've got to stay here until the job's completed."

"And meanwhile," George went on bitterly, "the others go on ahead with the gold."

"You're talking like a human," Harriet scolded him. "What in earth do you want with the gold?"

"Well, that's true," George admitted. "Maybe I liked being a human, Harriet."

"Please don't call me Harriet."

"That's your name, isn't it?"

"*Was* my name. It won't be much longer."

"You're very beautiful," he said abruptly, and edged closer.

"There's that, too," she told him acidly. "Beautiful—by whose standards? Human standards. It should mean nothing to you. I'm very much afraid that you're going to be a readjustment problem, George."

"There, you see! You called me George."

"Habit," she said, and yawned. "How does your skin feel?"

"Still smooth," he said happily.

"Still smooth," she echoed, but not happily. She longed to feel the first signs of roughening, see the first darkening of color. . . .

"I hear something," George said.

"Naturally. Do you think we tucked the hole in after us?"

"You mean—"

"I mean the hole wasn't seen until all the gold was taken because the stacks of gold bars hid it. But the hole's been seen for some time now. I imagine they've sent someone after us."

"We're unarmed!" George squawked.

"So what? Even if whoever's coming down after us is armed like a walking arsenal,

do you think he came down to kill us without finding out what's going on?"

"Well, no," George admitted in a whisper. "Listen. He's coming closer. What shall we do?"

"You look like an Earthman, don't you? And not what they would probably call an Underearthman?"

"Yes, but—"

"So, act like one. We'll have to play it by ear, George, at least until we find out who they've sent and how much he has on the ball."

"See, you're talking like an Earthman!"

"Because of who's following us, stupid. Hey, why did we strip?"

He stared at her in surprise. "Why, in order for the blue rays to take effect rapidly, changing us back to our own kind, and—"

"I know that, stupid. I mean, what are we going to tell him?"

"Compulsion?" George suggested brightly. "I mean, why did we come down here in the first place?"

She admitted, "That's a point. All right. The whole thing was a compulsion and—shh! here he comes!"

"Harriet!" Joe cried a moment later. He looked at her

and liked what he saw but couldn't tell if she were blushing or not, thanks to the blue light. She stared back at him, though, then turned away and covered her nakedness ineffectively with her arms and hands. Joe removed his fatigue shirt and tossed it to her and she got into it swiftly, buttoning it and straightening the tails along her flanks. The heavy shirt covered her from shoulders to mid-thighs.

"I think you've got some explaining to do," Joe said.

"I guess I have," Harriet said.

Joe looked at George Murdock and said, "You would have to be Murdock, of course. Mind explaining what you're doing down here?" While speaking, he tossed his T-shirt at Murdock, who fashioned it into a rough loin cloth which, under the circumstances, would have to do.

"Compulsion," said Murdock doubtfully.

"What he means," Harriet explained, "is that we don't know what we're doing down here. We don't even know where we are. Do we, George?"

"No," said George obediently. "We don't know what we're doing down here at all. We don't even know how we got down here."

Joe frowned and said, "But you both used the words 'down here,' so at least you know that much—that you're down somewhere."

"I guess we did," said George. "I guess we do."

"Listen," said Joe. "We found your clothing up—"

"It was a compulsion!" blurted George. "Leaving it up there at the lip of the hole."

"Oh, so you knew that much too," Joe said. He looked at them suspiciously and added, "Let's be frank. I was hoping I'd find you down here—and hoping when I found you I'd find you alive. I had no reason to be suspicious of you—but I'm suspicious of you now, and I don't know why except that your story sounds phoney. Want to start over?"

"Now, really," Harriet said.

"Suit yourself. What did you intend to do, just sit here until you starved to death or died of thirst or something?"

George looked at Harriet and cleared his throat and said nothing. "We were lost," Harriet said.

"Then you've been exploring?"

"A little. There isn't much to see. Caverns. We stayed in here because there's light in here."

The light seemed to seep from cracks in the wall. The

light was blue and not very bright. "If I went back down the tunnel and shouted, they could probably send down a rope for us," Joe said. "Would you want that?"

"Yes!" George cried.

"No," said Harriet. "I mean, since we're here, oughtn't we to find out exactly where we are and what this place is?"

"That's my job. I'm going to find out. But you don't have to."

"We're soldiers too," Harriet said. "We want to help. Don't we, George?"

"Yes," George answered dully, dutifully.

Harriet told Joe, "You have a bayonet and a couple of guns. Want to divvy the arsenal up a little?"

Joe considered this, and shook his head. "Not just yet," he said. "Don't see why we need the weapons anyhow. What do *you* expect to find down here?"

"I don't know," Harriet said at once.

Joe looked around. Two passageways besides the one through which he'd entered led out from the blue-glowing cave. "Any preference?" he said. "It's going to be dark, I might as well warn you, because I broke my flashlight."

"That's all right," George

said. "It gets lighter up ahead."

"Oh, does it? That's interesting."

"We were exploring there before," Harriet said. "Weren't we, George?"

"That's where we were exploring," George said, and pointed.

"Which passageway?" Joe asked.

"That one," George said, and pointed. But Harriet had already pointed to the other dark opening.

"I guess one of us is a little confused," she said.

Joe looked at her, suspicion back in his eyes. "I guess somebody is plenty confused," he said. He went toward the passage. "You two go first. Come on."

And he followed them into the darkness.

The Bajii of Urpadu paced back and forth in indecision before the row of gleaming crowns. Each of the cavern cities supplied him with a crown—solid gold for Ukana, gleaming silver for Toz, ruby-platinum for Holgg, and so on. Which crown he wore hardly mattered to the Bajii of Urpadu, but mattered to his subjects. Make Ukana happy today? But what had Ukana or the Ukanese sub-

jects done to deserve it? Toz, then? But the Bajii was not partial to silver, although he did not actually dislike it. Holgg! he thought. He snapped his fingers and performed a jubilant little jig before the crowns, snatching up the ruby-platinum crown of Holgg and placing it at a rakish angle on his bald head. Holgg, of course!

For now he remembered. Curse his memory, it wasn't as good as it had once been, but he'd been ruling the joint caverns of Urpadu for a great span of time. Still, the Bajii had never married and had no issue and, as far as he was concerned, would go on ruling in Urpadu till the crack of doom.

Thanks to the magic-worker from Holgg, this was entirely possible. Bless the Holggian magician, whose name the Bajii had forgot! For it is a tenet of Urpadu—the people are restless and need diversion, since nothing ever happens in the caverns of Ukana, of Toz, and of Holgg. There is no weather, not that the Bajii knew what weather consisted of. There are no changing seasons, no light-dark fluctuations of night and day, no storms, no sun, no tropics, no arctic, no desert and no jungle, no oceans and no tundras.

There is only U r p a d u — changeless caverns and generation on generation of the Bajii's green, scaly-skinned people.

Divert them! Amuse them! That's the way to keep your crowns!

The Bajii sighed. He had almost run out of diversions, and that would have been fatal, for wasn't it true that the royal heart surgeon opened the chest of whatever monarch ran out of diversions, to see what blight lay heavy on the moribund king's heart? And, shortly before the Holggian magician had made his discovery, hadn't the royal chest surgeon been sharpening his flint tools and eyeing the Bajii appraisingly? The chest operation, naturally, was fatal, but a new coronation always followed it, providing the folk of Ukana, of Toz, and of Holgg with some diversion.

Magician! thought the Bajii. Long may you live! May you prosper! But not, of course, he hastily added, at the Bajii's expense.

Perhaps, the Bajii suddenly thought, he should have placed the gold crown of Ukana on his head. After all, the gold crown was in a way symbolic. For, weren't the first fruits of the Holggian magician's dis-

covery a cavern full of gold bricks? Hadn't the heat borer and the anti-gravity machines developed by the Holggian magician led to all that gold? And wasn't gold the color of Ukana's crown?

No. Let it be Holggian ruby-platinum, in honor of the magician. The Bajii, deciding thus, took a ruby-studded cloak to match the Holggian crown, and fastened the clasp over his thin shoulders. I'm old, he thought. Old! Then he grinned, realizing that both the royal chest surgeon and the Holggian magician were still older. True, they might form league with one another; they would have to be watched. But the Bajii of Urapadu had a distinct hunch he would outlive them both.

The long cape trailing in a train behind him, the small bent king went on his bow-legged way into the throne chamber, where the aristocracy of Ukana, and Toz, and Holgg, were awaiting him. As he entered the chamber, throwing his scrawny shoulders back and with an effort even straightening his shanks somewhat, a great cheer went up.

"The Bajii! He diverts! The Bajii!"

He diverted, all right, the Bajii thought. But almost, he

had run out of diversion—which would have been fatal. His latest had been the semi-nudity bit. It was warm in the caverns of Urapadu, so why wear clothing? That is, why wear clothing if clothing had been worn since time immemorial? Wear a cape only, like the Bajii's cape! The style had quickly caught on and had proven very diverting. But it was absolutely the last diversion the Bajii of Urapadu had felt himself capable of—until the thrice blessed magician of Holgg had come forward.

This magician was seated now on the final step leading to the throne, his magician's cape draped across a body more ravaged by age than the Bajii's own, an emaciated, hard-skinned, loose-scaled body of the gray-green color of mouldy bread. Despite his infirmity, though, the magician of Holgg was smiling.

"I see your majesty wears the crown of Holgg," he observed with an octogenarian cackle.

"Ruby-platinum!" cried the Bajii, playing on the chauvinism of the Holggians, who were singled out for praise since he wore their crown. "I love ruby-platinum!"

The magician grinned, and bowed, his forehead scraping

the top step as the Bajii settled his skin-and-bones on the throne. Then, in the utter silence that followed, while the hundreds of aristocrats from Ukana, and Toz, and Holgg, awaited for word of the latest diversion, the magician said, "They're coming back, majesty. My agents inform me they have now entered the outskirts of the Tozian domain and are marching on the palace."

"Yes?" yawned the Bajii, not wishing to show his eagerness. "Who? Who is coming back?"

"Why, majesty! The two agents I sent to upworld, of course."

"If upworld exists!" a Tozian noble cried. Naturally, the Tozians were jealous of the Holggian magician's seat of favor on the uppermost step.

The Holggian magician cackled, revealing blackened gums and two teeth, like fangs, one upper and one lower, on either side of his mouth. "Oh, upworld exists!" he cried, still cackling. "Does it not, majesty?"

"Upworld exists," said the Bajii, and yawned.

"Gold!" screeched the Holggian magician. "The new symbol of Urpadu! Pure gold!"

"Calm yourself," suggested the Bajii.

"Upworld," the magician went on, "consists of caverns and caverns of pure, pure gold."

A groan escaped the assembled nobles from Toz and from Ukana. They did not hide their disappointment, nor their jealousy. It seemed a time for Holggian crowing, all right.

The Bajii sighed. If the magician from Holgg didn't watch his step, his own carcass under the flint instruments of the royal heart surgeon might be an object of diversion before long. For the Holggian's ethnocentrism could be dangerous. There had been ethnocentric wars before, hadn't there? The Bajii, who was old and past the age for bearing weapons, had no great liking for war. The long campaigns had a way of dragging out interminably.

The Bajii sighed, but the Bajii also said, "No, magician. You are wrong there. You see, while you have your agents and your agents made a swift, admittedly daring entry into upworld, the royal agents—"

"You sent agents to upworld, majesty?"

"Indeed," went on the Bajii in a friendly voice. "They

merely observed, however, and they have long since returned. Their report indicates that upworld is a region of immense diversity, although, sadly, a region where we can never dwell, thanks to the deadly actinic rays of an enormous ceiling light which seems to alternate with periods of darkness. At any rate, I merely point out that the caverns of pure gold are not the whole story of upworld."

"No, majesty," went on the magician doggedly, "but there is much gold in upworld, isn't there? Haven't we taken our share? And haven't my agents. . . ."

"Yes, man of Holgg! Yes, we have taken our gold. For distribution among all the people, not for the coffers of Holgg!"

"But, majesty. . . ." groaned the Holggian magician.

Much shouting and huzzahing went up, however, reverberating from the roof of the throne chamber, as the Ukani-an and Tozian nobles realized their sovereign was enriching them at Holggian expense. The Holggians, on the other hand, couldn't actually complain, for hadn't the Bajii worn his ruby-platinum crown and honored the top step with one of them? The Bajii

clucked happily. A long life of rule had yielded this secret to him: make no one deliriously happy, make no one intolerably sad, make everyone mildly satisfied and play the kingdoms off one against the other, and the royal chest surgeon will keep his distance. . . .

"Where is the people's gold?" demanded the Bajii in a loud voice.

"Majesty!" squawked the magician defensively. "It has been cached in a Holggian store - cavern. I never dreamed. . . ."

"Do not dream. Work magic."

The assembled nobles tittered at the magician's expense. The royal chest surgeon, seated cross-legged in the first row, as was his right, looked at the crestfallen magician appraisingly and at the Bajii hopefully, but the Bajii shook his head. Still, the surgeon fingered his bag of tools lovingly, as if his time would come soon.

Well, thought the Bajii, perhaps it would. Keep the people guessing! that was another thing. Keep them off stride! Expectant, confused, suspenseful! For example, if the Holggian magician fell entirely out of favor, the people would expect the Bajii to summon the royal chest surgeon

with a crook of his finger. Well, then, he would not! Only as a last resort would he ever yield to the expected. True, it would anger the royal chest surgeon, but the Bajii had survived his anger before. The key was ennui—or, a lack of ennui. The deadly ennui of the caverns; if somehow the Bajii could prevent the dreaded ennui from gripping his people and making them do desperate things, such as fomenting revolutions, everything would be all right.

"... while my magic is for all Urapdu, for the Bajii to dispense in the three kingdoms as he sees fit, it nevertheless," declared the Holggian magician, "is Holggian magic and therefore ought to benefit the kingdom of Holgg first and foremost."

"I am not aware that Holgg had its own Bajii," the Bajii said coldly, referring to the magician's use of the word, kingdom.

"I spoke figuratively, majesty."

"And you wish Holgg to keep an inordinate share of the upworld gold?"

"I merely suggest that in all fairness to Holgg. . . ."

But the shouts of the nobles from Ukana and Toz drowned out his words and the Bajii raised both hands for silence.

Momentarily, the royal chest surgeon misinterpreted the gesture, scooped up his bag of tools and headed up the steps happily toward the Holggian magician, but the Bajii waved him back.

"Silence," said the Bajii.

It grew silent.

"Archers!" called the Bajii, stentoriously.

Two dozen archers, their bodies greased and naked and unencumbered by any capes, male archers to the left of the throne and female archers to the right, filed from behind the throne-steps. The nobles from Ukana and Toz roared and shouted their approval, but the nobles from Holgg were silent. The Holggian magician stood up quickly, shooting desperate glances in all directions. In the instant it took him to rise, sweat was streaming down his face. He opened his mouth to talk, but his jaw flapped loosely and he said nothing.

The nobles of Ukana and of Toz roared again. The royal archers, who lived, and ate, and slept, and played, and loved in a small cavern behind the throne, awaiting the royal summons, had not been seen in a long time. The archers, if not overused, were always a diverting joy.

"Archers, ready!" said the Bajii.

Arrows were notched to bowstrings by the dozen men and dozen maids and the archers dropped motionless to one knee, awaiting the royal decree. They were like statues of green jade.

The Bajii raised the royal right hand, held it up. Two dozen bowstrings were drawn back in unison, the muscles rippling on two dozen sleekly oiled shoulders. The Holggian magician screamed and screamed, but the Bajii merely smiled, his hand poised. The Holggian magician ran down the royal steps, but the Tozian nobility closed in on one side, the Ukanian on the other. The Holggian magician fled back up the steps, waving his arms desperately, the sweat pouring from his face.

And the Bajii pointed the royal right hand—at the royal chest surgeon!

The dozen right hands opened. Two dozen bowstrings thrummed together. Two dozen arrows sped whistling to their target. The royal chest surgeon leaped up as if he had been struck—as, indeed, he had. He flung the bag of royal instruments high and leaped up one step toward the throne and fell there, pierced

front and back and both sides by two dozen arrows.

The bag of royal surgical tools was fought over by the chest surgeon's acolytes, the archers filed back behind the throne and disappeared, and the Holggian magician collapsed from fright. The Bajii gave vent to a deep-throated, royal sigh. He knew from experience that whichever surgical acolyte succeeded in winning the bag of tools would be so grateful for the royal appointment that it would be a long time before he even thought of opening the royal chest.

Even the Holggian nobility joined in the waves of cheering which engulfed the throne. True, their champion of the moment had been humbled and now quaked in fear before the royal throne, but hadn't the hated chest surgeon been done away with unexpectedly? Wasn't that something to cheer about? Besides, the royal archers were splendid specimens, male and female, and the Bajii purposely kept them under wraps most of the time. And further, the royal archers were usually summoned in cycles. That is, one unexpected execution was often followed by another. The Bajii, it seemed, liked things in pairs. Thus the

nobles cried their approval, awaited developments.

"Then I'm to live, majesty?" croaked the Holggian magician.

"For the moment, yes," said the Bajii magnanimously.

The new royal chest surgeon, a young fellow with the vivid green scales of recent maturity, held up his bag of tools and looked questioningly at the Holggian magician. The royal shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug, the magician shuddered and wished he had never discovered upworld, and the nobles roared their approval of the whole diverting show.

Meanwhile, the Holggian magician's agents approached the palace-cavern.

"I wouldn't go that way if I were you," George said a little desperately.

"Why not?" Joe Grange asked him, heading for a brightly-lit passageway.

"I don't know, I just wouldn't."

Harriet said, "Now, really, George." The passageway in question led to the cache of gold, she knew, but that wasn't too important. The upworlder Grange was important, and Harriet wasn't at all sure what to do with him. They still had some time, true;

they were some distance from the palace. But Grange was a problem, all right. Bring him on to the palace, to divert the Bajii and his court? Possibly, but Harriet had known such diversions to backfire fatally. For the whims of the Bajii and the whims of the royal court were unpredictable and Harriet had no desire to bare her chest to the royal chest surgeon. Still, they couldn't let the upworlder Grange prowl around down here much longer. For one thing, he might decide to take some kind of drastic action after he saw the missing Fort Knox gold. For another, George and Harriet, already having bathed in the blue light, were in the process of changing back to their true forms. *Some* kind of explanation would be necessary, Harriet thought with a grim smile, if the upworlder were suddenly to see his two companions grow scales and green skin!

Then, kill him?

They could hardly do that, for the Bajii might learn of it and the Bajii would have wanted at least one interview with the real, live, breathing upworlder. For diversion, naturally. Well, a pox on the Bajii.

But that, naturally, didn't solve Harriet's problem. And

George? George was a problem, too. The trouble was, George had swallowed the royal line about diversion being what made life worth while. So, when George had seen the manifold diversities of upworld, he had naturally preferred that world to his own. Result: a mildly mutinous fellow-agent who actually desired to return to upworld.

Joe was saying, "Well, are you coming with me or aren't you?"

George looked at Harriet, who shrugged. "Lead the way," she said, and Joe stepped through a ten foot long passageway which opened on a large chamber roughly the same size as Vault 15 at Fort Knox. And, like Vault 15, it was filled with stacks of gold bars.

"The missing gold!" Joe cried, running forward and examining his find.

Before Harriet could stop him, George rushed forward too and got both arms around Joe's neck, then freed one hand as they stumbled to the floor of the cavern, picked up a large rock with it, and bashed it across Joe's head. George got up, shaking. The rock was matted with blood and hair. Joe lay very still.

"You fool!" Harriet cried.

"Oh, you fool! He didn't really suspect us, don't you see? You didn't have to kill him. What will the Bajii say? Do you think upworlders hang from ceilings like stalactites? Where are we going to find the Bajii another one?"

Harriet got down on one knee next to Joe, examining him. His pulse throbbed regularly, heavily. His scalp was cut, bruised, and bleeding, but the skull had not been smashed. Harriet stood up. "You're lucky," she said. "He's still alive. If the Bajii ever found out. . . . Listen, George. He needs a doctor, and—"

"You'd better not report this to the Bajii or any of his officers," said George sullenly. "I'll claim you were in on it with me and got cold feet, see?"

"I'm trying to help you," Harriet said coldly. Joe groaned. Harriet added, "I said he needs a doctor. Very well, we'll get him to one. Remember that nice young fellow—what was his name?—one of the royal chest surgeon's acolytes. . . ."

"Nellafello?"

"That's the one, Nellafello! I once—well—diverted him. So he owes me a favor. Suppose we take Joe to your cavern, it isn't too far from here,

so we ought to be able to carry him. I'll watch Joe and you go find Nellafello. All right?"

"I didn't know you diverted him," George said coldly.

"My goodness, what's the difference? There's no such thing as sexual jealousy down here, and you know it. Prestige jealousy, that's all. You certainly have picked up some bad upworld habits, haven't you?"

George scowled but held his silence.

"Here's the rest of the plan," Harriet said. "While Nellafello is repaying his debt to me by healing Joe, we'll seek an audience with the Bajii and tell him we've brought back something even more diverting than the gold—a real, live, honest-to-goodness upworlder. We'll keep the Bajii on a string, though, until Nellafello tells us Joe's healed. We can tell the Bajii he's had an accident or something. How does it sound?"

"All right, I guess," George admitted reluctantly.

"Well, let's go, then. And don't forget where to find Nellafello. He's an acolyte of the royal chest surgeon, in the royal chest surgeon's quarters."

George lifted Joe's shoulders, Harriet took hold of Joe's feet, and off they went

with their unconscious burden.

Nellafello couldn't believe his luck. He hadn't let them see this on his face, of course, for it never paid. Still, it was really wonderful luck and it might even prove more diverting than Harriet's happy form of diversion.

For Nellafello, earstwhile acolyte second-grade to the chief royal chest surgeon and now royal chest surgeon himself because he had caught the defunct surgeon's bag of tools, was alone with an upworlder. Knowledge of the upworlders had been common for some time now, although no one had ever been this close to an upworlder before. Why, Nellafello could reach out and touch the unconscious, pale-skinned, scale-less creature if he so desired. And, best of all, Nellafello was alone with him. He had waited, feigning indifference, until the two Holggian agents who called themselves George and Harriet—outlandish upworld names!—had gone to seek an audience with the Bajii after summoning the new chest surgeon here.

Waited—and now, alone! With a creature only slightly human, a creature whose insides were a mystery to magic and to medical science.

For example, Nellafello asked himself eagerly, did the unconscious upworlder actually have a heart, as we humans have a heart? Was it in the same place? the same size? of the same muscular construction? Early external tests indicated it was, but what were external tests to the new royal chest surgeon? Hadn't he won his position through strength and bravery? But, on the other hand, couldn't the Bajii have him slain if he didn't prove diverting?

What better diversion than to open the chest of the alien upworlder and pluck out the still-throbbing heart and rush with it, hot and red, to the royal throne chamber, there to present it, as proof of Nellafello's devotion, to the unsuspecting Bajii?

Of course, there was no predicting the Bajii. Quite possibly, the Bajii might have other plans for the upworlder. That was why George and Harriet had gone to seek an audience with him. They thought he had other plans—or would develop other plans—didn't they? And certainly, George and Harriet were both somewhat older and far more worldly than Nellafello. Still, the prospect of opening the upworlder's chest was mighty inviting.

Eagerly, Nellafello got his bag of tools and opened it. With loving care, he fondled the sharp instruments, the pinching instruments, the sawing instruments. The blades were of flint and he'd re-chipped the edges himself, sharpening them to perfection. A deft cut, a swift plucking apart of the flesh, bone and membrane, and the upworlder heart would be bared. See? the upworlder was unconscious still. His death would be painless, in the interests of medical science and of Nellafello's career.

Am I overly ambitious for one so young? Nellafello wondered. He thought the answer was no. An overly ambitious new chest surgeon would have made an attempt on the Bajii's chest,—and probably wound up with two dozen arrows pricking his carcass. This of the upworlder, though, while it is ambitious, is not overly ambitious. Deciding thus, Nellafello brought his bag of tools over to Joe Grange's unconscious form.

Of course, George and Harriet would be angry. Well, upworld take George and Harriet! They'd left their prisoner with Nellafello, hadn't they? Nellafello was a free agent, wasn't he? Besides, George and Harriet looked

positively repulsive at the moment, precisely like upworlders, so if it came to a royal judgment, Nellafello was confident the Bajii's decree would be in his favor.

He approached Joe with a flint-bladed cutting instrument. Having given his fatigue shirt to Harriet, Joe was bare chested, but the bandolier of ammo was in the way. Nellafello removed it, noticing that another similar item went around the upworlder's belly. Deciding it was some charm or other, Nellafello wrapped the bandolier around Joe's waist over the cartridge belt. At least the upworlder would die with his charms and amulets to protect him. . . .

Nellafello leaned over Joe, the knife-edged surgical instrument inches from his chest. Nellafello took a deep breath, and sneezed. He lifted the scalpel-like instrument again.

Joe stirred and groaned.

The royal chest surgeon jumped back as if stung, watching the upworlder roll over sit up and gaze in a stupefied fashion across the room. Swiftly, the royal chest surgeon came up behind him, raising the haft of a pincer-tool, a heavy instrument used for peeling back ridges of chest bone, and brought it

down on the upworlder's already injured head. The upworlder slumped, rolled over again, and stretched out on his back.

Now! thought Nellafello, and returned to the upworlder's bare chest with his scalpel, making a few practice cuts in air before he was ready to plunge the keen blade home. He regarded his subject with keen interest.

"You fool, you see?" Harriet told George as they headed for the latter's cavern. "Did you ever see the Bajii look so delighted?"

"Well, no," George admitted.

"Oh, it will be a great day for Holgg and a great day for us, all right. But no thanks to you. *You* wanted to kill the upworlder! Tell me, did you ever see the Bajii look so genuinely diverted, so expectant?"

"No," admitted George, wishing Harriet would stop her infernal crowing.

"Even the magician knew his own agents had wrestled him out of the limelight. Did you see the look on *his* face? He's torn, that poor man. I really feel sorry for him. What we do is for the good of Holgg, and so he ought to be happy. But he's no longer di-

rectly responsible, and therefore he. . . ."

"Here we are," George interrupted, sliding the entrance stone back from the mouth of his small living cavern and politely stepping aside so Harriet could enter before him.

He was aware of a swift, lithe-limbed blur and a startled cry as Harriet went flying into the chamber. He followed behind her and saw the blur, which was Harriet, swoop down on Nellafello, who stood over the unconscious upworlder, a flint-bladed surgical tool poised to strike. He saw the blur strike the scalpel from Nellafello's hand and in the same motion strike Nellafello's cheek stingingly. He saw Nellafello fall back with a frightened cry as the scalpel went clattering to the floor.

Nellafello slapped a hand to his stinging cheek and whined, "Why did you do that?"

"Are you crazy or something?" Harriet asked him. "You—you were going to kill the upworlder!"

"To divert the Bajii, yes."

"I'll give you 'divert-the-Bajii!'" cried Harriet, but Nellafello ducked behind the upworlder's body and George said:

"That's enough, Harriet. He didn't know—"

"But we trusted him and he tried to pull a stunt like this. Nellafello, didn't you know we'd gone to the Bajii to arrange an interview before the entire royal court for the upworlder? Didn't you know if the Bajii wanted him killed the Bajii could have the royal chest surgeon or the surgeon or the royal archers do it?"

"I," Nellafello said proudly, "am the new royal chest surgeon!"

"You are?" gasped George.

Quickly, Nellafello explained what happened at the last meeting of the royal court, then smiled smugly at Harriet and George.

"That doesn't change a thing," Harriet said. "The Bajii now expects an audience with the upworlder, and he won't be disappointed if I can help it. George, whose side are you on?"

"Now, wait a minute. . . ." George began, but the new royal chest surgeon interrupted him, saying:

"I'm not opposed to what you say. How was I to know? If the Bajii wants an audience with the upworlder, far be it for me to kill the upworlder first. Nevertheless, I shall be at the audience and I shall

have the royal surgical tools ready."

He was thinking: to pluck out the upworlders heart and offer it, red and steaming, to the Bajii.

Oh, the life of a Bajii, thought the Bajii of Urapadu. He had a headache. Didn't the nobles of Ukana, and Toz, and Holgg, realize that Bajiis got headaches too? The pain drummed like an anvil between his temples, seared like hot needles behind his eyeballs. Oh, he would be cross and unpredictable today, the Bajii thought.

Naturally, he wouldn't inform the court of this. Why should he? In the first place, his mental state, now unpredictable, offered more diversion. In the second, if he told the court of his temporary weakness there was no telling what they might do. He remembered with a sigh—then a shudder—his lost youth. Once, when he was very young and not Bajii yet, the old Bajii of Urapadu had attended his court with a head cold. Things hadn't gone right for the poor old Bajii: he had lacked the necessary sharpness and responsiveness to keep his subjects under control. Result? The old Bajii had been given over to the royal chest sur-

geon, recently defunct, and the royal chest surgeon, while four strapping nobles had held the old Bajii down, had plucked out the royal heart and tossed it at the nobles first-grade. The current Bajii, a mere stripling from Toz then, had caught the warm royal heart and had, on the spot, been proclaimed Bajii of Urapadu. Ever since, he'd kept on his toes and managed to remain Bajii—and alive.

He selected the Holggian crown of ruby-platinum for the second day running. There was no choice, he told himself: it had to be the ruby-platinum crown, for weren't the Holggian magician's two agents bringing the upworlder before him? Hadn't Holgg won the field a second court-meeting running? But he'd have to watch that, the Bajii knew. His subjects of Ukana and Toz wouldn't like it and, besides, the Holggians in their power would remember that the Bajii himself was originally from Toz while, obviously, it was time for a Holggian native to reign.

The ruby-platinum crown felt heavy, oppressively heavy. It was his headache, the Bajii knew. Usually, he liked the feel of a crown. Then he thought suddenly of the upworlder. Would the upworlder

prove as diverting as the two Holggian agents had indicated? The Bajii hoped so, for perhaps diversion would take the Bajii's mind off the Bajii's headache. And besides, if the upworlder were sufficiently diverting, the royal court might never realize their Bajii was indisposed and, as such, ripe for dethroning. Or, if the upworlder proved disappointing, on the other hand, the Bajii might order his death either in an unexpected way or at an unexpected time, thus saving the day for himself.

His royal ruby-platinum cape trailing, the Bajii of Urapadu made his bow-legged way into the throne chamber. There was a buzz of excitement out there, and the buzz did not subside when the Bajii made his entrance. This confused him at first—had, in fact, never happened before—but then he realized that the two Holggian agents and their upworlder had preceded him into the court. Naturally, all eyes were on the newcomers. Hadn't they all white skin, soft skin, scale-less skin? Hadn't they that loose, stringy stuff on their heads instead of flesh-shocks? Hadn't they, in short, the look of complete alien-ness?

But, decided the headache-plagued Bajii, this wouldn't

do. Not for a minute. For the Bajii knew his office demanded the center of interest for himself. Lacking that, all would be lost.

The Bajii raised both hands over his head as he sat down on the throne. Instantly, the two dozen royal archers filed out from behind the throne, the dozen males on one side, the dozen females on the other. The archers strung their bows, arched their bows, and looked at the royal arm for a signal. By now, some small number of the nobles from Ukana, from Toz, and from Holgg, had turned from the three alien-looking creatures to the throne, but their numbers were insufficient.

Divert them! thought the Bajii of Urapadu. Perform the unexpected! Astound them!

He lifted his hand. He pointed.

Two dozen shoulders went back, two dozen hands loosed the feathered shafts. A loud thrumming filled the air of the throne-chamber. Noble ladies screamed, not knowing where the fatal twenty-four shafts were speeding.

"... the Bajii up there," George said to Joe Grange, and died.

One moment he stood next to Joe, talking, explaining.

The next, Joe heard this sudden strumming sound and saw George's eyes go big and round with fear before a sound, as of many hammers striking something hard, but not too hard, was heard. Then the whites of George's eyes rolled back and George fell at Joe's feet, his body riddled by two dozen arrows.

Women screamed. . . .

"The Bajii wants attention!" Harriet cried. "Quick, Joe! Fling yourself on the royal steps! Prostrate yourself before the throne, if you value your life!"

Joe's head was still numb. He had a lump the size of a big egg which hurt excruciatingly when he touched it. Until this moment, he had taken the meeting with this underworld king as a kind of joke, although they told him it was serious after they'd revived him. They had not told him, however, that his life might depend on it. Nor had they known George would be killed almost upon entering the throne room. Apparently this Bajii of Urapadu fellow. . . .

"Joe! Prostrate yourself!"

He shook his head stubbornly, wondering if his refusal were instinctive and hence irrationally foolish or willful but foolish nevertheless. Because any moment

might be his last moment if he didn't bow before that madman up there.

"Joe? Aren't you going. . . ."

"No," Joe said. "I didn't come down here to kow-tow to any underworld royalty, if any. I came down to find out about the gold." He looked up as he spoke. The archers had notched fresh arrows to their bowstrings, for gaily dressed page boys were carting George's corpse from the chamber, and the Bajii of Urapadu was leaning forward from his throne, staring straight at Joe. It seemed a fine time to kow-tow, but Joe didn't.

Bluff? he thought. It was all well and good to speak softly and carry a big stick, provided you had a big stick to carry. But if you were all alone in the enemy camp and had no stick at all, let alone a big stick, and still had to speak, it sure as hell didn't figure to speak softly. . . .

"Hey, you Bajii!" Joe called suddenly. The archers tensed, the nobles became instantly silent, and the Bajii leaned forward still further.

"He can't understand you," Harriet whispered in a frightened voice. "Now that George is dead, I'm the only one here can speak English."

"He understands the tone."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Are you determined to go through with this audience?"

"Determined? Are you kidding? That's what you brought me here for. The king expects it and all the people expect it. What am I going to do, back down? Besides, I want that Fort Knox gold back and I want assurances such theft won't occur again."

"You *want*?" hissed Harriet. "You'll be lucky to get away with your life. You want, do you?"

Joe nodded, walking toward the throne. The points of the two dozen arrows followed him, and George's swift death had been a sobering warning. This Bajii fellow didn't fool around. If Joe displeased him, Joe would be a dead man.

"Well, mostly," Joe said grimly, "I want not to wind up the way poor George wound up. Is that reasonable enough?"

"Reasonable? With the Bajii reasonableness doesn't matter? Quite the reverse, but you. . . ."

"Harriet!"

"What is it?"

"Why, you're—turning green."

"Naturally. It's about time, don't you think?"

"But I never realized you actually were one of them."

"Sure. It was easy to counterfeit Wac papers, to learn your language, to . . . but that doesn't matter now. In a few minutes my scales ought to be visible again too, and. . . . Forget it, Joe. Take a look at the Bajii. He's staring at us. He's growing impatient, and so are the archers."

Joe reached the first step of the little stone pyramid below the throne. "You'll translate for me?"

"I guess I'll have to."

Trying not to think of the two dozen archers surrounding him, Joe stared up arrogantly at the Bajii of Urapadu. "Are you the bird who got away with the Fort Knox gold?" he asked in a voice as insolent as he could manage under the existing circumstances.

Harriet translated and the Bajii said, "We have the gold, yes. Do you truly live in a world with a huge light which would wither our skins shining half the day?"

"We do," said Joe. "but I didn't come here to discuss the meteorology of my world. If you want to send us an ambassador later, you can do so. Right now, I want the gold!"

Harriet looked at Joe, shaking her head. Joe nodded and,

reluctantly, Harriet translated.

The Bajii laughed and laughed and Joe saw a young fellow—it was the doctor, Nellafello—raise his small black bag hopefully in the first row. The Bajii looked at him, smiled, shrugged—as if to say, not now, my friend, but soon, very soon. Joe wondered what Nellafello's function was. He hadn't been told.

"O.K., we'll get back to that later," Joe said, and Harriet translated. "Mind telling me *why* you took the gold? Is gold a medium of exchange down here?"

"Not exactly," said the Bajii.

"Not exactly? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Careful!" warned Harriet.

"We like gold, but it is not why we stole it. There is much gold in Urpadu."

"Then why?"

"To see if we could do it!" answered the Bajii at once. "At first, my Holggian magician had in mind a bank, any bank, because he knew your world regards its banks as all but burglarproof and, if we could but enter one of them, then we could enter at will in your world, anyplace we wished, for any reason. So. . . ."

Joe interrupted him with a

harsh laugh, trying not to see the ready archers. "Is that so?" he demanded, Harriet translating reluctantly. "Do you know the population of upworld?"

"Several hundred million," guessed the Bajii.

"Over two billion!" Joe corrected him. "And yet they sent just one man down here on this punitive expedition."

"Punitive?" gagged the Bajii.

"Punitive, yes. Does that give you some indication of our strength?" Joe hoped it gave a mistaken indication: for the Urpaduse, capable of boring through rock or metal with their heat borers, capable of negating gravity, might become a serious menace if they remained aggressive before they learned the ways of the world.

"We don't fear you," said the Bajii. "We fear no one."

"I don't want fear. I want respect."

The Bajii clapped a hand to his head. His archers misinterpreted the gesture, arching their bows. Nellafello came forward eagerly, black bag ready.

"Anyhow," the Bajii said, "I was telling you about the gold. After my magician determined that the theft of gold or currency from any bank

would be a blow to your prestige, I next determined that if we could find the bankiest bank—"that was how Harriet translated it with her greener and greener lips—"your prestige really would suffer. Since Fort Knox is the bankiest bank in upworld, I sent my Holggian magician to Fort Knox."

An old white-haired fellow standing a dozen feet from Joe cackled and danced a little jig. This, Joe assumed, was the Holggian magician.

"I see," Joe said. "Well, you can send him right back. With the gold."

"Joe," Harriet said.

"Translate it."

She did so, shaking her head.

The Bajii listened, and frowned, and clapped a hand to his head, and squinted, and let a groan escape him—as if he were suffering, Joe thought—and shouted, "Flea! Flea on the belly of a flea on the belly of a flea! You dare to talk to the Bajii of Urpadu this way?"

There was no answer to this one. Joe remained silent.

"Well, let me tell you something," the Bajii said, still clutching his head. "Let me tell you—"

"Talk, just talk!" hooted

one of the nobles, and Harriet quickly translated for Joe's benefit. "We don't want a Bajii who sits there talking!"

"It's a Tozian," Harriet said quickly. "Even though the Bajii is a Tozian himself, or was originally, the Tozians and the Ukanians probably feel left out in the cold because Holgg—"

"And you're a Holggian?"

"Yes."

"Loyal to Holgg, whatever Holgg is?"

Harriet shrugged. "I'm loyal to—myself. I'm a woman, Joe."

He nodded. The Bajii seemed distracted. Acting like a man with—with a painful headache! And the nobility was restless. Therefore, if the Bajii could be flattered and befuddled into talking, into bantering words when the nobility craved action. . . .

"Oh noble Bajii!" Joe cried, and prostrated himself before the throne as Harriet translated. "Oh, most noble king of kings! If you could forgive this worm in the intestine of a worm. . . ."

"What's intestine?" Harriet hissed, and Joe tried to explain while the Bajii said:

"In my magnanimity as Bajii of Urpadu, young man, I can forgive you, but—" clutching his head—"I'm

afraid you can see that my people are beyond forgiving and crave only the special sort of diversion I can give them. As Bajii—yes, as Bajii—” Clearly, his head was in a whirl—“I know exactly what, how—where were we, young man?”

“Holggian lover!” an Ukanian noble shouted. “We’ve had enough of your talk.”

“Down with the Bajii!” cried another voice.

“Favoritism!” shrieked a woman. “Twice running, the ruby-platinum crown! Are we Tozians to stand for this, from a turncoat Tozian?”

“No!” roared a dozen voices.

“Now, wait,” said the Bajii.

But half a dozen nobles rushed to Nellafello, who, Harriet now explained, was the royal chest surgeon. She did not, however, inform Joe of the royal chest surgeon’s duties. The nobles crowded around Nellafello and spoke rapidly and he tried to run away from them, but found himself surrounded. Once, angrily, one of them grabbed the black bag away from the young royal chest surgeon and would have flung it in the air, but Nellafello got down on his knees and begged, and so the bag was returned to him.

“Divert!” screamed the Bajii. “I must divert them.”

Trembling, Nellafello began climbing the steps toward the throne.

“Archers!” screamed the Bajii, but Harriet told Joe:

“It is written that the royal archers cannot stop the royal chest surgeon in the performance of his duty.”

“But what’s going to happen?”

“Why, the royal chest surgeon will open the Bajii’s chest and pluck out his heart and hurl it among the nobles, whoever catches it becoming our new Bajii. And it’s about time!”

Joe was too startled to answer her. For the moment, he could only watch, but he knew that the new Bajii’s first act would be to have Joe slain—for, hadn’t Joe triggered the revolution?

Up the steps slowly went the royal chest surgeon, opening his black bag.

“Archers!” screamed the Bajii again, and pointed his finger tremblingly at the Holggian magician. “That man is responsible for my ruin!”

The two dozen backs bent, the two dozen hands opened, the two dozen arrows whistled to their target. The Holggian

magician leaped, and was impaled, and died. By then, Nellafello had reached the throne. Several nobles joined him, flinging the Bajii over on his back and pinning him there. The royal chest surgeon's scalpel rose, an utter silence fell on the throne chamber, and the Bajii kicked and thrashed in his death-throes.

Then the flint blade struck and the Bajii screamed once and was dead.

"Come on!" cried Joe, and grabbed Harriet's hand, tugging her upstairs toward the throne.

Joe reached it a split second before the royal chest surgeon could perform the traditional rite of plucking the royal heart. Joe flung him away from the Bajii's body and fought off the astounded Urapaduse nobles.

"Joe!" Harriet screamed. "They'll kill you."

He laughed, and it was a wild laugh. "Don't you want to be a queen?" he cried, and kicked two of the nobles downstairs. He grappled with a third, then lifted him bodily and flung him at the fourth. They went tumbling down after their fellows and the royal chest surgeon made a wild swipe at Joe with his dripping scalpel. Joe lunged to one side and struck the royal

chest surgeon in the face with his right first. Nellafello sobbed and slumped to the floor.

"Quick," Joe said, and nudged the Bajii of Urapadu's corpse from the gilt throne. He took the still-protesting Harriet by the hand and sat her down in the Bajii's place, putting the ruby-platinum crown on her hairless green head and the ruby-encrusted cape about her fatigue-shirt.

And miraculously, Harriet's uncertainty vanished. She stood arrogantly and pointed at the royal archers and, trained to obey whoever sat in the gilt throne, they strung arrows. She pointed again and the archers unleashed a volley of arrows over the crowd's heads. Silence and order fell on the throne-chamber.

"I am the new Bajii!" cried Harriet, who was now green, and scale-skinned, and flesh-shocked.

"Bajia," someone corrected. "Our first Bajia, ever."

Harriet grinned at Joe. "It ought to divert them for a good long time, thanks to you. I guess I owe you plenty."

"I want the gold," Joe said.

Reluctantly: "You'll get it."

"And I want no more horsing around with upworld, understand? It's why I made you queen, Harriet. Sure, you can get away with a few thefts,

thanks to your anti-gravity magic, but you know our strength. Right?"

Reluctantly: "Right."

"Would you want to establish diplomatic relations with us?"

The new Bajia considered, then shook her head. "I'm an absolute sovereign down here. I'm going to like it, I think. But intercourse with that crazy democracy of yours—"

"I understand," Joe said. "Will you have the gold delivered to the anti-gravity shaft for me?"

"Yes."

"And give me a guarantee of safe-conduct?"

"Yes, Joe. Oh, Joe, if only you were green and scaly—" She sighed. "How we could rule together!"

"I'm not, and I have a job to do."

"Yes, Joe. You may go now. We won't bother your people again."

Joe walked from the throne chamber without looking back. Already he was thinking of the brass-hats and how astonished they would be and wondering what story he could possibly tell them. Well, he'd think of something. It didn't really matter. What they wanted was the gold, and he would give them the gold. Beautiful yellow gold.

As he left, he heard the roar go up behind him, spontaneous, full-throated, thunderous:

"Hail, Bajia! Hail! She diverts! Hail, Bajia!"

Joe smiled. The colonels would, as colonels generally did, miss the best part of the story.

THE END



WASTE NOT

By HENRY STILL

Benson told his boss, "Look, we have to have space in the freighter for our rocket fuel and you can't use that same space to pack in more freight." Benson's boss grinned back and said: "Want to bet? I'll show you how to do it." And he did!

CAPT. FRANK BENSON had listened to the same impossible demand at the end of every trip for two years. It was still nonsense. But listening to the Old Man was part of his job with the Marvenus Import Co.

Scrimbley glared at the freighter captain.

"On every Venus jump, 189 cubic feet of cargo space goes to waste. That space is worth \$75 per cubic inch!

Benson said tiredly, "On takeoff the tanks are full. By the time we hit dropout velocity, most of the fuel is gone. You're right, the empty space is there, but how the hell are you going to fill it 10,000 miles out from Venus?"

Saving money for the firm was a religion with Scrimbley.

"We could jettison the

empty fuel sections and save hauling the empties," Frank said.

"No!" Scrimbley barked. "That was fine under government subsidy, but not now. Half the sections we'd never find!"

Scrimbley lifted his thin old frame from behind the desk, walked around it and stood teetering on the balls of his feet. His shoes squeaked in the silence.

"There is an answer, Captain Benson," he said softly.

I'll bet it'll save 15 cents a trip . . . Frank was tempted to say it but he didn't. He waited, knowing how much the Old Man loved to see him squirm.

Scrimbley pulled a capsule out of his pocket and spilled its contents on the desk top.



The blast hurled him toward a white-hot inferno.

The gray substance quivered like a globule of mercury.

"See this?"

Benson nodded. "What is it?"

"On Venus they call it morgus. It's a rare yeast mold. Right now there are not over five ounces of it on Earth and someone discovered its fermentation will produce the rarest of vintage wines in a matter of hours. It's worth \$100 an ounce."

"So," Frank said, "how does it fill empty fuel tanks?"

With exaggerated mystery, Scrimbley pulled another capsule out of his pocket.

"This," he said, "is Venusian swamp water. It contains micro-organisms symbiotic with the morgus. Watch." He spilled a drop of the water on the gray globule.

Frank watched. The yeast ball swelled quickly to the size of a baseball.

"That," Scrimbley pointed, "is just as valuable, volume for volume, as the drop I started with. And it'll do the same thing again with another drop of swamp water. On your next hop, you'll carry 50 pounds of morgus, dose it with swamp water in space, and—" he snapped his fingers "—the empty tanks are full."

"Is it approved by the Interplanet Commission?"

"Nooo," Scrimbley said hesitantly, "not all of its properties have been tested yet."

"Then it's out," Frank said firmly. "My contract stipulates only approved cargo. No bootleg stuff."

"Your contract contains other clauses, Captain Benson," Scrimbley said pointedly. "You *are* interested in keeping your job?"

"Okay," Frank sighed. "Fifty pounds of morgus. You radio Venus to have it ready. I'll haul it."

Captain Benson stood on the concrete ramp outside the Venus warehouse, mopping rivers of sweat off his face. The morbid gray sky hovered low today, almost down to the tops of the towering tree ferns. Behind the rubber-roofed stone building a scarlet orchid three feet in diameter burst open with an audible pop. A harmless swamp snake, perhaps 30 feet long, wriggled out of the rain forest and started across the concrete. Frank shooed it away from the ship.

"Hey, Mort," he yelled up the freight shaft, "is the morgus aboard yet?"

Mort was navigator and freight-master. His head appeared in the open well 50 feet above.

"What's morgus?"

"I told you, dammit," Frank said. "The special stuff the Old Man wants."

"Bucket of something up here with a lid on it."

Benson climbed up the ship's throat ladder and pried the lid off the pail. It was filled nearly to the top with the slimy gray yeast mold.

"That's it. The Old Man thinks it's going to revolutionize Marvenus and save at least 30 cents a trip. What about the swamp water?"

"I sent Harry with a jug. You think a gallon will be enough?"

Harry, the engineer, completed the freighter's crew. By the time Frank climbed down, he was coming out of the jungle with a jugful of muddy water.

"You goin' to drink this?" he grinned.

Benson snorted his disgust and went into the warehouse to check out with the quartermaster and sign copies of the manifest. Then he climbed back up to ship control and closed hatches.

"All clear?"

Harry acknowledged from the engine room. Mort answered by switching on the computer. Frank watched the indicator come around and

leaned back in the acceleration couch.

"Fire all tubes!"

The ship vibrated with the muted roar of the rocket blast. After four minutes acceleration decreased.

"How's the fuel, Harry?"

"Real good, skipper. You saved three ounces on that shot. The Old Man will love you."

"Hell, no," Frank retorted. "He'll think if I could save three I could make it six."

"Number One's empty. What's the gimmick on this new goop? Mort says we're supposed to fill the tank with somethin'."

"Hang on," Benson said, "I'll be right down."

The freighter was in free fall now, coasting up the long spiral that would intercept Earth in her orbit in 157 days. He'd have to goose up the old tub occasionally to offset the sun's gravitational drag, but even with the unpredictable mass of the expanding yeast mold, there should be a margin of safety.

He hauled aft to the freight compartment, picked up the bucket and jug, and shoved them ahead of him down the tube to the fuel section. Harry was unbolting the cover plate. Frank pried the lid off the pail.

"Boy, that's ugly stuff," Harry said.

"We've hauled ugly stuff before, this won't be the last if we want to keep drawing a check now and then."

"It's okay with me. What do I do with it?"

"Dump it in the tank."

Harry complied. The morgus slipped out of the pail in a single lump and floated lazily to the bottom of the tank.

"Pour in about a pint of this water," Frank said, "then we let nature take its course. When Number Two's empty, knock out the connecting bulkhead and pour on another pint. This stuff's supposed to keep on expanding as long as it gets its dose of swamp water. Theoretically, that's forever, isn't it?"

He watched while the liquid formed into weightless globules, swirling slowly into the tank. Then he went back to the bridge.

He was busy for 20 minutes correcting course and applying additional velocity.

"Number Two's empty, skipper," Harry called.

"Right. Moisten the morgus and let her fill up." He fired the tubes momentarily for enough momentum to help the water drop into the tank.

Over the intercom came the sound of shattering glass.

"Hey, skipper!" Harry sounded frightened. "I busted the jug when you goosed her just then."

"Where'd the water go?"

"In the Number Two tank, with the morgus."

"Oh, hell," Frank said wearily, "here, Mort, take the controls. I've got to go aft again and see what the stuff's going to do."

"I don't like it," Harry said uneasily when Frank got there. "Look at it go."

The scorching gray mass already had grown halfway up the sides of the fuel section, hissing softly like water on a hot stove.

"Bolt on the cover and let it simmer," Frank said. "That's half-inch metal. Should hold it."

Harry was tightening the last bolt when the cover started to bulge.

"Look out!" Frank yelled, "it's going—"

"BUNG!"

The steel plate narrowly missed Benson's head, crashed through the bulkhead and sizzled off into space. Bolt heads whistled through the air like shrapnel. Harry screamed. Frank leaped for an emergency patch and slapped it on the gaping hole in the hull.

Harry pressed his hand over his left shoulder. Blood trickled through, spilled off in bright scarlet droplets floating in the air.

"Goddam bolt head," he gasped, "furrowed the muscle."

Benson found a first aid kit and applied a coagulant to the cut.

"It'll hurt for a while." Frank applied a bandage. "But you can claim compensation for it."

"Look!" Harry whispered.

Frank turned.

The morgus was boiling slowly out of the tank like brains spilling from a skull.

"How far does this go?"

Harry asked grimly, "I've got an engine watch to keep down here."

"It'll stop." Benson hoped he sounded confident. "It'll stop as soon as it uses up that dose of water."

But he didn't know how far the yeast would ferment on that overdose of water. No one knew that. It was just like the miserly Old Man to go off half-cocked on a crazy experiment to save a few pennies. Frank could have signed up for another hitch in the Space Force, but oh no, he had to fall for the big-money lure in private industry.

"You feel all right?"

"Yeah," Harry muttered, scanning the bank of engine gauges. "I'll be all right if that blasted stuff keeps out of my way."

Frank went back to the bridge. Mort raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Scrimbley wanted a full freight load," Benson said.

"He's sure got it this time." He told the navigator about the mold's prodigious growth.

"How about fuel? Will we have enough for letdown, or do we crash land this junk?"

"I don't think it'll add much mass," Frank said, "anyway we've got five months to worry about it."

"Hey, skipper!" Harry called. "This goop's crowding me out of house and home. I don't have room to move around."

"Is Number Three on automatic?"

"Yeah, it's on."

"All right, then. Get out of engine control and come on up here. But leave the hatch open. We don't want another blow-up."

A minute later Harry joined them on the bridge. His brow was creased with worry.

"That stuff's not slowing down, Frank," he said. "At the rate it's going, it'll be in the room in an hour."

"Ugh," Mort said, "imagine sleeping with that."

Benson didn't want his anxiety to show, but it was high time the mold stopped fermenting.

"It's worth \$100 an ounce," he said, "maybe the Old Man'll give us a bonus."

Harry made a noise like a razzberry.

"The CO₂ volume's up," Mort said quietly.

"Carbon dioxide! That's the fermentation. Throw another separator on the line and see if we can dump the excess."

Harry grinned suddenly.

"You know," he said, "fermentation also produces alcohol. I could use a good shot of something right now."

"Cut it out," Frank growled, "we're in a tough spot."

"I wondered when you'd admit it."

"Say, wait a minute!" Benson scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Baker freight hold is right above engine control."

"It was," Harry said, "the last time I looked."

"That hold is refrigerated," Frank said. "Cold stops yeast action. Let's step up the refrigeration."

"You'll kill the veni-frogs."

"I'll take responsibility for it"

"They're worth 200 bucks apiece for pets," Mort said.

"I rate my skin higher than that," Frank answered. He set the refrigerator dial and watched the temp gauge move slowly toward freezing. Harry hauled himself aft in the axial tube to watch the results.

"Hey, Frank," he yelled. "Come here. Quick!"

Benson shoved into the tube, bumped into the engineer halfway down the shaft.

"This is the end of the line," Harry said, "We're too late with the frost. The stuff's already in the bunk room and pressing up the tube."

Frank could see it now, the gray mass shoving toward the bridge, its progress visible as it moved inch by inch. Steady, relentless movement.

"Get a torch," he barked. "Hurry!"

Harry leaped to the bridge and returned with a small oxygen torch used for emergency repairs in space. Benson set it for wide flame and pressed the button.

The fermenting yeast melted like snow before the searing jet, but a wave of hot gas billowed out. Frank collapsed, hanging in midair, limp and weightless.

Coughing and strangling, Harry grabbed his heels and

tugged him back. He slapped on an oxygen mask.

Frank came around in a few minutes. The ventilation system was clearing the toxic fumes from the bridge.

"Smells like sulphuric acid," Mort said. "Didn't anyone analyze this stuff to see what it's got in it?"

Benson shook his head blearily, rage and fear rapidly clearing his brain. His rage was directed toward Scrimbley, millions of miles away.

"Give me a knife," he gasped. "Let's see if we can dump some of it."

Harry supplied the knife. Frank hacked off a bulbous armful of the flaccid mess. Mort opened the inner lock to the escape hatch and closed it when the morgus was inside. Then he flipped open the outer lock.

Air pressure in the lock puffed the gray mass out and away from the ship.

"Get another—"

Frank never finished the order.

The lump of mold detonated in a blinding flash of light. Even in the absence of air to carry the blast wave, the explosion jarred the ship and danced it several points off course.

"Damn!" Frank exploded.

WASTE NOT

"That's out. We'd blow ourselves out of the Solar System."

"What the devil caused it to explode?" Mort asked.

"Vacuum," Benson growled. "Who ever heard of a substance that would detonate on contact with a vacuum."

Harry patched the cracking plastic. Mort coasted to the hatch leading aft from the bridge to see the yeast's progress.

"It's only five feet down, skipper."

"Dog it shut," Harry yelled. "Maybe we can hold it this time."

"No good," Frank muttered. "Leave it open. If that plate smashes in, it'll take the instrument board and the star globe. Then we're done for sure."

"I'll take mine quick, if you don't mind," Harry said.

"How much time before it fills the bridge, skipper?" Mort asked.

"Maybe an hour. Maybe two."

"If we put on full power, could we cut across the spiral and go straight in? We might pick up the moon."

"You know the answer. The best we could do is three days. Then crash in with no fuel at half a million mph."

A lobe of the morgus pushed

into the hatchway, pressed a lethal tendril across the deck. Until then they could shut a door on it. Now death was with them.

"So help me God, Frank," Harry whispered, "you can have my hide for busting that jug." He had backed up against the forward bulkhead, as though he would push on out through it.

"Don't blame yourself," Benson said. "We should never have taken the miserable crap aboard."

"Can't we do something, skip?" Mort asked.

So now he was the captain. Now was the moment when he earned the \$30,000. Now was the moment when he earned his life.

"Harry," he said, "are those two tanks still hooked into the main tubes?"

"Sure. But the valves are shut."

"That makes it tougher." Frank opened a locker and dragged out a suit. They used it to make hull repairs in space.

"What's the deal, Frank?"

"The only way to relieve pressure on this crud is through the tubes," Benson said, climbing into the suit. "You guys screw me into this rig and hand me a torch. I'll have to cut into at least one

of the tanks. Wish me luck."

"People get killed messing around in the tubes," Harry said. "Let's match for it."

"Not this time, it's mine."

"When the stuff oozes out, it'll blow," Mort said.

"I timed that first batch," Frank said. "It took three seconds to detonate. With a fraction of acceleration on the other tubes, we may be able to drop it behind as it peels out."

Mort screwed down the transparent helmet and radio-tested. Harry handed him the torch and helped him out the airlock. The magnetic boots gripped the smooth black and white striped hull of the ship.

There were four main drive tubes. He had a moment of panic remembering which hooked into the One and Two tanks. Then he climbed over the lip and wriggled through the narrow ventura throat. With thick-gloved hands he groped clumsily, found the inner jet nozzle and flicked the torch to a fine cutting point.

The flame cut like butter as he guided it in a rough 12-inch circle. The steel plate popped out, the pressure of the morgus behind it, and in the light of the torch he could see the dull-gray mass within. It bulged out.

Frank kicked free, squeezed frantically through the throat

and climbed over the lip of the tube.

A gout of flame lanced out behind him.

He scrambled forward, clawing at the smooth steel, boots slipping as the ship lurched under his feet. For one agonizing second before it happened, Frank knew the ship was accelerating as the yeast mold squirted out and detonated.

Slowly, slowly while a scream of fear rose in his throat, Benson watched his metal boots pull free from the metal.

Gradually, but completely without his control to stop it, he tumbled into space.

"Throw me a line!" he yelled in the radio.

"We see you skipper," Mort answered calmly. "The line's out. Use the torch!"

Frank nearly sobbed with relief. In the horrible moment of panic, he had forgotten that he held a perfect miniature rocket motor in his hands. He fumbled at the control, fearful that something might have jammed the mechanism.

The ship was 50 yards away now, diverging more rapidly, a plume of flame jetting from one stern tube.

The lifeline curled lazily out past him, stiffened to a straight line. He grabbed it.

Harry hauled him in the hatch. The two men helped him peel out of the suit.

The swelling mold now filled more than half of the tiny bridge compartment.

Like an atomic blast, the freighter surged forward, bowling them back into the surging mass of morgus. Frank blacked out.

When he regained consciousness, Harry was yelling, "The mold has stopped. We've still got breathing space."

"How long we been out?"

"About two hours, I think," Mort said. "That damned yeast squirted out and boom! It worked better than prime fuel. Take a look." He pointed to the star globe.

"What the hell!" Frank looked again. "That says we're outside the Mars orbit!"

"It checks," Mort said. "I'll figure the speed later, but no ship has ever hit it before."

Benson slogged through the spongy mess to the radio and tapped out a message:

"Benson to Marvenus . . . freighter in Mars orbit with superfuel aboard . . ."

It was several minutes before the answer came back.

"Scrimbley to Benson . . . What the hell you doing out there? . . . Get home and stop wasting it."

THE END



A "JOHNNY MAYHEM"
ADVENTURE

MAGELLAN WAS A PIKER

By C. H. THAMES

Mayhem's assignment was very confusing. They told him: "If you lose this one, you are indeed lost. But if you win it you can lose also!"

THE body hung suspended head down.

If you watched closely it would turn occasionally, almost imperceptibly with the motion of unseen currents and eddies in the green liquid of the vat. The body was quite naked and was that of a man grown thin and small and wrinkled and transparent-skinned and sunken-chested and pot-bellied and knobby-jointed with the weight of eighty or more years. It was, in fact, the body of a man who had died some years before—peacefully and in his sleep—of nothing more exciting than the

terrors that awaited him.

general run-down of old age.

"I never would have thought," a pink-cheeked, white-haired little fat man whose name was Harker Party said, watching the slowly stirring figure in the vat. "I never would have thought it at all. There's old Stack Vermier coming back to life!"

"It isn't Stack Vermier and you know it, Mr. Party," the girl who was with Harker Party said. She was a pretty girl with a thrusting virginal figure which the laboratory smock, left by the Galactic League along with the vat and the other apparatus, did not hide.

"You look at him floating there and tell me he ain't Stack Vermier, Sue-Ellen?"

"That," said Sue-Ellen, reciting the words the men from the Galactic League had left for her in the manual that came with the laboratory apparatus, "is only Stack Vermier's body. Stack Vermier is dead and there isn't anything that can bring him back from the dead, unless it be the good Lord himself. But the body is—has become," she corrected herself, remembering the words, "a vessel for someone named Mayhew or Mayhem, I forget exactly which."

"A vessel?"

"You know what I mean, Harker Party. A vessel. Like a spaceship's a vessel?"

"Ain't no spaceships that bothers to come all the way out here to Gee-em-see," Harker Party said.

"What about the aliens, Mr. Party?" Sue-Ellen said breathlessly. "Are you forgetting the aliens who come here?"

"Well, I ain't never seen them."

"They're here. That's why the Galactic League is sending this Mayhew or Mayhem person."

"Never heard of him."

"Well that's why, anyway."

"Besides," Harker Party went on relentlessly, an unusually serious look on his pink-cheeked face, "how do we even know there's still such a thing as the Galactic League? Last time they come to Gee-em-see was when they brought this crazy laboratory stuff. Since then, it was like they dropped off the edge of forever or something. Did *you* see them when they came?"

"I'm only nineteen," Sue-Ellen said. "I was just a little girl then."

"Aha!" Harker Party cried

triumphantly. "So you're following the instructions of folks you ain't ever seen."

"They said," Sue-Ellen told Harker Party, "the apparatus would start to work when they were sending this Mayhew man here to occupy Stack Vermier's dead body. We have to watch and push a couple of buttons, is all."

"Spooks," said Harker Party. "I don't like it a-tall. Why can't this Mayhew guy come here in his own body like other people?"

"Because he ain't got a body of his own, Mr. Party. That's what my Daddy told me the Galactic League folks said, before he died."

"Child, your Daddy never would have dreamed up something like that out of his own head. He was too solid, your Daddy."

"He didn't dream up anything, Mr. Party. *They* told him. *They* gave him the manual and everything. My Daddy was once over to the Milky Way System when he was younger," Sue-Ellen added proudly.

"What's wrong with Gee-em-see?" Harker Party bristled with defensive chauvinism. "Why does a fellow have to cross all them lonely parsecs—"

"Parsecs."

"All right, parsecs. Why does a fellow have to cross all them lonely parsecs just to reach the Milky Way System. What's wrong—" Harker Party demanded sternly and proudly "—with Gee-em-see? What's wrong with the Greater Magellanic Cloud, Sue-Ellen? It's the only thing I ever had against your Daddy, him going all the way out therè. You know something? He was gone almost five years, but he looked just the same when he come back."

"Here comes Mr. Mayhew now!" Sue-Ellen cried suddenly. His eyes almost popping from his head, Harker Party stared at the vat.

It was about twice as tall as a man and a dozen feet across. It was perfectly square and only the front wall was transparent. Through this front wall you could see Stack Vermier's body, floating loose-limbed and slack-necked on the surface of the green liquid. On the surface now, and not within it. For the level of the liquid was rapidly dropping. Sue-Ellen and Harker Party could hear it running out through unseen pipes, gurgling and splashing as it went.

Finally, when it seemed as if Harker Party's eyes would pop from his head, the liquid drained from the tank entirely, leaving Stack Vermier's withered old body, drenching wet, on the floor inside the transparent wall. The dead old man's left arm suddenly twitched, the wrist lifted a withered old hand, the fingers drummed momentarily on the floor.

"He moved!" Harker Party shouted hoarsely. "I saw him move, I tell you."

"Of course he moved," Sue-Ellen said. "That's our Mr. Mayhew, coming to life." But Sue-Ellen's usually rich, throaty voice was oddly flat and strained.

"You're scared too, kind of, ain't you?" Harker Party wanted to know.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Party. I'm plenty scared, I guess."

"What's supposed to happen now that he's moved?"

"We open the door and— and get him out of there."

Party looked at the body of the dead man inside the vat and shook his head jerkily. "I don't think I want to do anything like that, thank you just the same, Sue-El-len."

"But if the Galactic League sent Mr. Mayhew here it's because we need him. We've got

to remove him from the vat and bring him back to life."

"Is that so, girl? Just how does the Galactic League—if there still is a Galactic League, mind you—how do they know what we need and what we don't need?"

"That's easy," Sue-Ellen said, and prepared again to dredge the manual up from her memory. "Every frontier world, even all the way out here in Gee-em-see, has a Galactic League Observer who watches and reports to the Galactic League when there's any trouble. So you see—"

"Is that right, Miss know-it-all?" Harker Party demanded triumphantly.

"Why, yes. Yes it is."

"Well let me tell you something," said Harker Party slowly. "Do you know who the Galactic League Observer out here in Gee-em-see happens to be?"

"Why, no."

"Then I'll tell you, Miss know-it-all. When the Galactic League folks came visiting and left all this scientific stuff, they also appointed an Observer. It was Harker Party they appointed. It was me, sure enough. And I ain't seen any trouble and I ain't reported any trouble. Heck, girl, even if there was trou-

ble I wouldn't know where to report it to."

"There's trouble, Mr. Party. The aliens . . ."

"They ever hurt you any?"

"No, but—"

"There, you see?"

"I only know what the manual and my dead Daddy said I should do if ever the vat filled with water and Stack Vermier's body came pouring into it over the sluice gate. There isn't any water in there now, Mr. Party. I'm going in."

She walked—but slowly and not very decisively—to the edge of the transparent wall and beyond it to where a little door could be seen on the adjacent opaque wall. "Are you coming, Mr. Party?" she called softly. "I don't think I could drag Stack Vermier's body out all by myself."

"Well darn you, girl, it looks like I'll have to help you at that, don't it?" Grumbling—but obviously trying to hide his fright behind bluster—Harker Party joined Sue-Ellen at the door.

Just then through the door's judas hole they could see Stack Vermier's body get up with amazing sprightliness and advance toward the door, smiling at them.

They fled.

For the first time in the many transmigrations of his *elan*, Johnny Mayhem awoke not after he had been removed from it but still within the resuscitation chamber. He bounced nimbly to his feet—but this was still the pre-death response of the dead man whose body he occupied. It was the very last response of the corpse: from that moment on, the corpse was Mayhem and no longer a corpse. At least it would be for thirty days.

As Mayhem approached the inside of the door he smiled up at the judas hole reassuringly. Probably, he thought, it was a frightening experience for whoever was on the other side of the door, even if they did know the Johnny Mayhem legend. This time, though, he reminded himself, he had transmigrated beyond the pale of the legend which surrounded him. Those people out there had probably never heard of Johnny Mayhem. For them the awakening of a dead man they had once known could mean anything—but it would not mean the coming of a living legend named Johnny Mayhem.

Mayhem shrugged as he went to work on the door's mechanism. As he worked he

let the astronomical figures run through his mind to confirm for himself, at least in a physical sense, how far he had come.

On Earth they would say Gee-em-see was within the constellation Doradus, although actually, of course, it lay far beyond not only Doradus but the whirling pinwheel of two hundred billion stars of which it was a part. For Gee-em-see, as the natives called it—the natives of the dozen or so inhabited worlds out here on the edge of infinity, each world a spark in the bleak depths of intergalactic space, each one isolated from and probably unknown to its neighbors—Gee-em-see was the Greater Magellanic Cloud, an island satellite of the Milky Way Galaxy, lying in right ascension $5^h 26^m$, declination -69° , and 33° from the galactic equator.

Twenty-six thousand parsecs, Mayhem thought. The distance was staggering, yet it was the figure which separated the Greater Magellanic Cloud from the Milky Way Galaxy. Probably, he thought, it had been a mistake setting up colonies all the way out here. They had been part of an ambitious program of colonization some two hun-

dred years ago, but now—along with the program—they had been all but forgotten. Not only hadn't the Gee-em-see colonies been able to keep in touch with the many human civilizations in the Galaxy itself, they had given up space travel altogether and had each one of them become an utterly isolated world in which the people had somehow returned to a more primitive way of life—perhaps matching the culture of Western Europe on Earth in the 18th century or before.

And now, Mayhem recalled as he brought to the surface the hynosleep indoctrination he had received while his *elan* was en route from Alpha Centauri to Gee-em-see, there was trouble.

Trouble not only for the colonists—but possible trouble for the Galaxy itself. And trouble, Mayhem thought with utterly no self-consciousness, is my business.

It hadn't always been. Once he had been plain Johnny Marlow, an Earthman, but that seemed a long time ago.

Now every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League post, however small, must have a body in cold storage waiting

for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. No one knew when Mayhem's services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the Hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanism of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem—a bodiless sentience. Mayhem—Johnny Marlow, then—who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, many years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Sagittarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been frozen properly . . . an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Ga-

lactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him . . .

Now on the Gee-em-see planet Mayhem opened the door of the resuscitation chamber and called after the retreating figures: "Hey, don't be afraid! Don't run away, I won't hurt you."

But they showed him only their flying heels, and then they were gone. Mayhem barely had time to see that one of them had been a man and one a girl. But he wasn't thinking of that now. His voice—quavered. He tried it again. He said, softly, "I am Johnny Mayhem." It was a small voice, a reed-thin voice—and, worst of all, a quavering voice.

It was the voice of an old man.

There was no need for a mirror, which—anyway—was lacking. Mayhem lifted his hands before his face and stared at them. Old hands, withered hands, the fingernails oddly blue and the skin of the palms creased and wrinkled, the skin of the reverse side stretched so thin and leathery you could see the veins clearly through it. Mayhem looked down at his body. A few tufts of gray

hair clung, looking foolish, to his chest. His flanks were thin and sinewy, his knees knobby, his feet splayed and flat.

I'm eighty years old, he thought incredulously. I've been just about everything: I've been a kid of ten and a fat man and a thin man and a sick one and a strong one, but I've never been a woman and I've never been an old man.

He was an old man now.

He shook his head slowly. It wasn't merely a grim joke on Johnny Mayhem. It might be a grim joke on the entire Milky Way Galaxy. For Mayhem had been sent here on the single most important mission of his entire strange career.

Johnny Mayhem had been sent to reconnoiter—an invader.

For the first time in recorded history, the Milky Way Galaxy and its environs had been invaded by an alien people. Not human. Form unknown. But clearly, invasion. Five of the Gee-em-see worlds, Mayhem's hypno-sleep indoctrination had informed him, were completely swallowed up. That is, the worlds remained but not a human being was left on any of them.

This one was the sixth.

And the invader, unknown, unfathomable, had come.

A Galactic League scoutship had seen the single immense alien ship, ten times the size of anything we had ever built.

The scoutship, manned by two-dozen hand-picked men, had barely had time to send a subspace message to the Hub. Then the scoutship, like the populations of the five invaded worlds, had vanished completely.

For the first time in its history the human race was seriously threatened with massive mysterious destruction—from the outside. From the vast and mysterious.

From the outside, Mayhem thought for the tenth time. ... The outside. ...

"H-hello there," the girl said timidly. "I came back."

"I can see that," Mayhem said as he left the tank. "I'm sorry, miss, but I don't have any—"

"Clothing?" the girl tittered nervously. "You're old enough to be my great grandfather. But here—" and she tossed Mayhem a cloak which he enfolded at once about his shoulders. Its edge trailed to the floor and Mayhem thought with a grin that now he must look like a tent with an an-

cient old head sticking out the top.

"You're afraid," Mayhem said. "Aren't you?"

"Not of Stack Vermier, I'm not."

"Was that his name, Stack Vermier?"

"Yes, sir."

"You must understand this, miss. Stack Vermier is dead. I am not Stack Vermier or Stack Vermier's ghost. I—"

"You are Mr. Mayhew or Mayhem or something like that."

"Mayhem. But weren't there two of you?"

"I think Mr. Party went to get a bottle of wine. He'll feel more like talking to you after the wine."

"I'll wait."

"You can talk to me."

She was an unusually pretty girl, Mayhem observed, with a figure that more than matched the pretty—if anxious—face. The observation on Mayhem's part was purely cerebral, for he had been endowed with old Stack Vermier's eighty-year-old body and this was one case in which the flesh would forever drag down the spirit, he thought with a smile.

"What's funny?" the girl demanded.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking. Listen, miss. You

seem more frightened of me than you do of the aliens."

"If there are any aliens," she said promptly.

"I assure you there are aliens. It's why I am here."

"How do you know there are aliens? We ought to know, not you. I'm not saying there *aren't* aliens but I don't know for sure that there are. Now old Harker Party, he would say there weren't any and that's all there is to that."

"Who's old?" Harker Party called. "Why, next to Stack Vermier here, I'm just a kid ain't even started to shave yet." His pink cheeks were pinker than before as he approached them. His eyes glowed with the wine he had consumed. Even the top of his head—where a bald spot showed through the white hair—was as red as the tip of his nose.

"It isn't Stack Vermier, Mr. Party," Sue-Ellen said. "It's Mr. Mayhem."

"Trying to tell you we're invaded by aliens, Sue-Ellen. I heard that."

"What do you think, Mr. Party?" Mayhem asked.

"Since you ain't Stack Vermier or anyone we know, I don't figure I ought to tell you what I think."

Ethnocentric, Mayhem thought. That wasn't good. It wouldn't matter so much if the Mayhem legend had reached the Greater Magellanic Cloud, but it had not. Party's ethnocentricity—if it were typical—could be dangerous, not so much to Mayhem as to the Gee-em-see's themselves.

"Listen to me," Mayhem said. "Did you know that five of your fellow Greater Magellanic colonies have been completely wiped out by the alien—and we don't even know how?"

"Since we don't even know if there are any other worlds out here in Gee-em-see besides our own, of course we don't know how."

"I mean *we* don't. The Galactic League. You're our Observer out here, they told me."

"Never had to observe nothing," Harker Party grumbled.

"Then you don't think there are any aliens on your world?"

"Didn't say that, mister. Didn't commit myself."

"Well damn it," Mayhem said in exasperation, "why don't you go ahead and commit yourself?"

"Now you listen to me, old man," Harker Party retorted angrily. "You maybe ain't

Stack Vermier but you're old as he was. For all we know you could be a senile old goat telling us a lot of crazy stories. Right, Sue-Ellen?"

"I think we ought to at least listen to what Mr. Mayhem has to say."

"Before we send him off to the old folks' home?" Harker Party chirped happily. "Well, maybe we could at least listen."

"Maybe you'll tell me, miss," Mayhem said. "If you're not sure there are aliens here—what makes you think there *might* be?"

"The ship," Sue-Ellen said.

"Didn't see no ship," Harker Party said.

"The ship, whether he saw the ship or didn't see the ship," Sue-Ellen almost shouted. "Some folks saw it. I saw it."

"What kind of ship?"

"Spaceship, Mr. Mayhem. In the sky like our histories say we used to have. Only big. It was big as a whole town. It was bigger. It came and hovered close to our city here and it was almost as big as the whole city. It came like it was watching or looking for something."

"Didn't see it none," Harker Party said.

"You were out of town and you know it, Harker Party."

the girl said, her eyes flashing.

"Well, maybe. But still, there weren't—"

"Then it went away," Sue-Ellen told Mayhem.

"And didn't come back?"

"Well, yes and no."

Harker Party snorted, "Yes and no, she says."

"I mean, Mr. Mayhem, we didn't see it come back none, but they talked of it plenty over to Three Forks Village, how it came over every night and—"

"Three Forks Village? How far is that from here?"

"Three day journey down river," Harker Party said promptly.

"They are disappearing," Sue-Ellen said.

"Who's disappearing?" Mayhem asked her.

"The folks from Three Forks Village," Sue-Ellen said.

"So they say," Harker added.

"Well are they disappearing or aren't they disappearing?" Mayhem demanded.

"I ain't been there," Harker Party said. "If a man can't see with his own eyes—"

"Refugees came to the city," Sue-Ellen explained, "from Three Forks Village.

Half the town's gone, they say."

"Hasn't your central government done anything?" Mayhem asked.

"Got none," Harker Party told him. "Never needed a central government. A lot of trouble is all a thing like that ever brings."

"I'd like to speak to some of those refugees," Mayhem said.

"Can't, I guess. Unless you want to visit them over to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Because they're sick in the head, claiming aliens took their kin away, we put them in the hospital for sick folks."

"It's the truth," Sue-Ellen admitted.

Mayhem shook his head grimly. The Gee-em-see'rs, mankind's frontier against an alien invasion, had the social mentality of ostriches. They didn't bother going to Three Forks Village to confirm or refute what they had been told: they put the refugees in a hospital because, if they dared to tell tall tales about any invader, they were clearly sick in the head. It was a neat way of not facing what you did not want to face. But it was only a tem-

porary solution and it could be a fatal one.

"I want you to take me to Three Forks Village," Mayhem said.

"Now you better look right here," bristled Harker Party. "You can't go around telling us what to do."

"This world belongs to the Galactic League," Mayhem said. "But I'll be frank with you: if I thought I could reach Three Forks Village without your help, I wouldn't bother to ask you. Naturally, though, I don't know my way around your planet."

"Maybe you want me to give you a guided tour," Party chirped sarcastically.

"If you're the Galactic Observer, I want you to take me to Three Forks Village."

"If you don't do it, Harker Party," Sue-Ellen said on impulse, "I'm going to take Mr. Mayhem myself."

"But girl, what do you want to mess with that trouble over there for?"

Sue-Ellen cried triumphantly: "Then you admit there's trouble at Three Forks Village?"

"Sure I admit there's trouble. People are disappearing. When folks disappear, that's trouble. I never said a thing about aliens, though. But I'm not going to let you go alone,

Sue-Ellen. Your Daddy wouldn't have liked it."

"Then you'll come with us?"

Harker Party smiled and nodded. When he smiled, Johnny Mayhem thought, he looked something like Santa Claus. A cynical Santa Claus and a girl barely out of her teens—and himself, Mayhem, in the body of an eighty-year-old man. These, Mayhem thought grimly, were mankind's first line of defense against the unknown alien.

He shook his head and asked, "When can we start?"

"Soon as we can get us a riverboat, Stack."

"How long will it take to sink in that I'm not Stack Vermier?"

"I can't help it if you *look* like Stack Vermier."

Mayhem looked at pretty Sue-Ellen. She shrugged.

Then they all went outside to find a riverboat.

For three days and three nights they traveled down river on the flat-bottomed boat. The boat was small, perhaps two dozen paces long and eight or nine wide, with a single above-decks cabin, like a thatched hut, a steering oar and a pole which they could walk down the length of the boat when the current

slackened. It was rich level country they passed through, Mayhem observed, country that could have been wonderful farm land except that the Gee-em-see worlds suffered from under-population to such an extent that most of the land went untilled. There was a pounded clay road which paralleled the river on its east side for most of the way, and every several hours Mayhem would see a horse-drawn cart or a rider or some people walking. For the most part, though, the road—like the alluvial land they passed through, was deserted.

"Not much farther," Harker Party said on the third day, soon after they had eaten breakfast.

Mayhem asked him, "How can you tell?"

"See up ahead, where the river bends? It's straight as an arrow after that, maybe three four hours, is all."

Mayhem nodded and used the steering oar to get them around the bend in the river. The current carried them toward the east bank, where a small copse of evergreens momentarily hid the clay road from view. When they could see it again, Mayhem was surprised to find upwards of a dozen people, loaded down with make-shift traveling

bags and helped by three or four dray horses, plodding along the road from the direction of Three Forks Village.

"Hallo there!" Harker Party boomed.

The man in the lead stared at the riverboat and then waved his hand frantically in the direction of Harker Party's city upriver.

"What's the matter?" Party demanded.

"Aliens," the man said in a frightened voice as Mayhem poled their boat closer to shore. "They took over, strangers. If you were planning to visit Three Forks Village, you can forget it."

"Is it dangerous?" Mayhem asked. "Is that what you mean?"

"I wouldn't know if it was dangerous or not. Only thing is, there are practically no human folks left. Just a few, maybe, sulking around like stray dogs. Aliens got most of the others."

"What about yourselves?" Mayhem asked.

"We pulled out of there before dawn. Figured it was our last chance. Take it from me, old fellow, and don't go on down there."

"Have you actually seen the aliens?" Mayhem asked.

"No. Don't show them-

selves much, I guess. The way they hang off, sort of, it's like they was testing us for something. Testing us, I say."

"What did you mean when you said the aliens 'got' most of the others?"

"Got 'em, you know. Got 'em to go up in that alien ship. Got 'em to surrender."

"By force of arms?"

"Didn't see no aliens," the man said laconically as the riverboat drew quite close to shore. "Didn't see no arms. I couldn't say. Only, they been talking to me too."

"Talking to you?"

"Like in my mind. I can't explain it. Old Doc Carrew, now, he figured some people—not many, but some—was immune."

"Is Dr. Carrew with you now?"

"No," the man said dryly. "I guess Doc Carrew himself just wasn't immune. They got him, anyways."

"If you're immune, why did you leave the village?"

"Didn't say I was immune. How the hell should I know if I'm immune or I'm not immune? Doc Carrew thought some people was, but look what happened to Doc Carrew. I don't want to get dragged up to that spaceship, nosiree."

The riverboat drifted on.

The dozen figures, with their baggage and horses, plodded upstream on the river edge.

Less than two hours later, Mayhem saw the giant spaceship.

It was the biggest man-made — or creature-made — body he had ever seen in space, except for the space-stations ferrying shiploads of cargo or passengers to major planets. It hovered several thousand feet above ground and must have been more than half a mile in diameter, utterly round and utterly devoid of ports, protuberances or hatches of any kind. It seemed quite motionless.

Below it, where the clay road paralleling the river forked thrice—one leg continuing beyond the village along the riverbank, one cutting out eastward and one crossing the river on a wood-plank bridge—was the village of Three Forks.

Or, what had been a village. For although the rude huts and the handful of more solid edifices remained, the muddy, unpaved streets of the town were deserted. Harker Party shouted a few tentative hallos as Mayhem brought their riverboat to the quay, but there was no response. Sue-Ellen, wordless

and big-eyed, was staring up at the spaceship.

"I never saw anything like it," she said.

Mayhem nodded and admitted frankly that he hadn't, either. "Like what?" Harker Party asked. "Like a village without any folks in it? So they ust up and left, what's so terrible about that?"

"Like the spaceship, Mr. Party," Sue-Ellen said.

Harker Party had been dozing when they first spotted the spaceship and had not yet seen it. "Trouble with you," he said, "is you don't know when it's a good idea to keep your eyes on the ground and not go staring off into space."

"But just *look* at it, Mr. Party," Sue-Ellen said.

Reluctantly, the white-haired man tilted his head and stared up at the sky. He was plump and sleek like a force-fed goose but his neck stretched and his Adam's apple showed thin and hard before he jerked his head down again.

"Well?" Sue-Ellen demanded.

"Maybe," Harker Party said in a very subdued voice, "we should have taken the advice of those refugee folks."

Smiling grimly, Mayhem

tied their riverboat up at the quay and stepped off onto solid ground for the first time in three days. Sue-Ellen followed him at once, very nimble and swift of foot. But Harker Party had to be coaxed off the riverboat.

Party was for hiding in one of the deserted buildings but Mayhem soon talked him out of that. "In the first place," he said patiently, "we didn't come here to hide. We came here so I could see—and maybe do something about—the aliens."

"That's your business, Stack Vermier. I mean—well, that's your business. I ain't going to show myself and—"

"In the second place, isn't it possible the aliens emptied Three Forks Village because they intend to level it?"

"To do which?"

"To level it. To bomb it."

"Let's get out of here!"

Harker Party cried.

"The best thing for us to do, on both counts," Mayhem went on, "is to wait on the riverfront. If we stay on the quay, they ought to see us."

"Like sitting ducks we'll be."

"In the second place, if they start hitting the town, we can either get away by

riverboat or cross the bridge and head out for open country that way. How does it sound?"

"Like I wish I stayed home," Harker Party said glumly.

"You can only hide so long," Mayhem said. "Eventually you'll have to admit you're a member of the human race. Don't you understand, mankind may be in trouble. This could be a threat not only to Three Forks Village and not only to your planet, but to the entire inhabited universe. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"We got no name for our planet," Harker Party said morosely. "We just call it the world."

"Well anyway, I'm staying. You brought me here, which is all I asked you to do. You don't have to stay."

"I couldn't leave a tired old man like you to face them alone, Mr. Mayhem," Sue-Ellen said. "I'll stay with you."

Mayhem grinned. "I assure you, only my body is old. Anyway, thank you, Sue-Ellen. What about you, Mr. Party?"

"Well," Party grumbled, proving for the time being at least that his bark was worse than his bite, "I can't leave

this defenseless girl alone with a strange man—even if he is dressed up in Stack Vermier's body. I'll stay, I guess."

Mayhem nodded and Party shook his hand solemnly. A gesture, Mayhem thought. Hand shaking. It had been with humanity for a long time. It was part—an almost infinitesimal part—of what it meant to be a man. Was this vague, ill-defined thing known as human culture, made up of a thousand thousand things like hand shaking, now seriously endangered? Here on a world almost infinitely removed from humanity's birthplace?

Gee - em - see, Mayhem thought The Greater Magellanic Cloud. Named for Magellan, first man to circumnavigate the globe—although, actually, Magellan perished midway in the attempt and his crew returned to Europe without him. Magellan, who had made the first really long journey. The ancestors of these colonists—of silly old Harker Party and of Sue-Ellen, the brave girl who might one day be a frontierswoman of whom humanity could be proud—had made a journey which eclipsed Magellan's achievement, which

made Magellan look like a piker. And now the aliens—coming from *outside* the Milky Way Galaxy and its satellites—had eclipsed that voyage as it had eclipsed Magellan's. Did victory, then, belong to the aliens? Was it a simple equation, because they had come the furthest?

"Mr. Mayhem!" Sue-Ellen screamed.

Mayhem shook his head to clear it of the strange funk which suddenly had possessed him. Sue-Ellen and Harker Party were running.

Running and running and running.

As if they were mired in molasses.

Their feet pumped up and down slowly but you could tell they were straining every muscle. Yet they advanced more slowly than a slow-motion moving picture.

Mayhem looked up, but the gigantic spaceship hadn't moved. "What's the matter?" he cried.

"They — they're grabbing us!" Sue-Ellen screamed again.

They were running in slow motion twenty-five or thirty yards from where Mayhem stood. He walked toward them. He began to run. He had no weapon because no weapon which was produced

on this primitive Gee-em-see world would do much good against an alien invader who had spanned intergalactic space. But he felt responsible for Sue-Ellen and for Harker Party.

He ran—and slowed.

He could feel his straining, eighty-year-old muscles fight a sudden increase in weight. As if, all at once, he had been set down on a Jupiter-sized planet. It was an effort to run. Running became almost an impossibility. He watched Harker Party and Sue-Ellen come to a dead stop.

But their muscles still strained as if they wanted to run.

He called to them and received no answer. But mutely, the agonized expression on Sue-Ellen's face said that she had heard him.

Now Mayhem himself was barely moving. He could feel nothing but the terrible pressure of the increased weight, like blastoff in an obsolescent spaceship which lacks the stasis field. He heard his bones—the bones of the dead Stack Vermier—creak. He wondered momentarily how he would fare in a younger, stronger body.

Then, stiff as stone—like a statue of himself—he toppled. A split second before

his head hit the ground he saw that Harker Party and Sue-Ellen had collapsed too.

He came up through distance and through color. It was a familiar sensation, like that of transmigration. He thought for a moment that he had lost his tenuous hold on Stack Vermier's body, but then he felt the aches and the pains of his fall and knew that he had not.

He opened his eyes and knew, instantly yet without knowing quite how he knew, that he was within the spaceship. It was a small room with metal walls and a metal ceiling and a cold metallic floor on which he was lying and he knew there was no room like it on the Geem-see world.

"Are you all right now?" Sue-Ellen asked. "I was worried about you. An old man like you . . ."

"I'm all right," Mayhem said shortly. "Where is Party?"

Sue-Ellen shook her head. "I don't know, Mr. Mayhem. When I came to, he was gone. I called him, but there's nothing. Nothing," she repeated, her eyes going wide, "not even a door or a window—"

"Take it easy," Mayhem

said. He wished his was not the voice of an old man. He wished as he stroked her shoulder and her hair while she sobbed that he did not have to do it with hands which had lived for eighty years and which now were dead. But that was the way of Johnny Mayhem—the only way. Mayhem, the living legend who was not alive as other men are alive.

Sue-Ellen cried against his hard, bony, ancient shoulder. He tried to soothe her with his voice, but it quavered and shook, the voice of an old man.

All at once, Sue-Ellen stopped her crying. "You look old and you feel old and you have the voice of an old man," she said, staring into Mayhem's eyes, "but you're not really old. I can tell you're not." And, rising to her knees, she planted a kiss on Mayhem's leathery old cheek: on the cheek of the dead Stack Vermier.

"Thank you," Mayhem said softly. "For what you said, I mean. I think I needed that."

"Well," Sue-Ellen smiled, wiping away her tears, "it wasn't your idea getting into an old body like this."

Mayhem smiled back at her. "And don't you go worrying about the doors and

windows or lack of doors and windows. If we got in here, we can get out of here."

COME, a voice said in both their minds at once.

Sue-Ellen jumped against Mayhem and said: "You—you heard it too?"

"Telepathy," Mayhem said. "Scientifically controlled telepathy is something we have not mastered, but it isn't black magic."

RADIO TELEPATHY, the voice said.

Mayhem stood up. "Where are you?" he demanded. "Let us see you."

THAT WOULDN'T BE POSSIBLE, HUMAN. WE ARE NOT ABOARD THIS SHIP. YOU THREE ARE THE ONLY ONES HERE.

"Then what—"

RADIO CONTROL. WE NEVER LEFT HOME. THUS DO WE EXPLORE.

"Where do you come from?"

WHERE DO YOU COME FROM? WE HAVE BEEN TOLD BY THE STOUT MAN THAT YOU ARE NOT OF THIS WORLD.

"From the mother planet," Mayhem said. "From the birthplace. We call it Earth."

OUR HOME IS IN THE GALAXY YOU CALL ANDROMEDA. OUR CIVILIZATION IS FAR OLDER

THAN YOURS, EARTH-MAN.

"So, it's older."

YOU SCOFF? THE DIFFERENCE IS ASTRONOMICAL. WE GATHER YOU RECORD CIVILIZATION FOR SEVEN THOUSAND OF YOUR YEARS. OUR CIVILIZATION GOES BACK—WITHOUT INTERRUPTION—FOR ONE BILLION OF YOUR YEARS. IN THAT TIME, WE HAVE POPULATED THE ANDROMEDA GALAXY TO CAPACITY, MOSTLY BECAUSE WE HAVE FEWER POPULATED WORLDS THAN YOU HAVE.

"What do you want?"

WORLDS TO OCCUPY.

"We've barely scratched the surface. Why don't you contact Earth and work out an arrangement? We don't claim to own the entire Galaxy."

NEVER, the voice said. SO HAS IT ALWAYS BEEN WITH US. WE SHARE WITH NO ONE. WE OWN, DO YOU UNDERSTAND? WE MUST OWN.

"You won't, without a war."

DID YOU COME HERE FROM YOUR EARTH TO TELL US THAT?

"Yes, if you want it that way."

DO YOU ACTUALLY SUPPOSE YOU FRIGHTEN US? WE HAVE GOBBLED UP SIX OF YOUR FRONTIER WORLDS WITH NO TROUBLE. THIS ONE WILL BE OURS TOO.

"The frontier," Mayhem said, "is not the Galaxy. These people are primitive. You ought to know they don't represent a culture which has spanned interstellar space."

TRUE, BUT FRONTIERS USUALLY PRODUCE THE HARDEST RACE. HERE, EARTHMAN, IS AN EXAMPLE OF YOUR FRONTIERSMAN.

The wall in front of Mayhem shimmered, grew indistinct. Through it came Harker Party.

Or what was left of Harker Party.

He looked about furtively, casting his eyes this way and that. His eyes—which now were slits in his haggard face. He trembled as he walked, reaching Mayhem and collapsing and saying, froth bubbling at his mouth, "Hello there, Stack? How are you, Stack? Stack Vermier, don't you know me, boy? Help, Stack! Help!"

Then he sobbed uncontrollably, and Mayhem could not

shake him from the hysteria.

BROKEN, the voice said. AS WE CAN BREAK ALL OF YOU.

"Why don't you try me?" Mayhem demanded boldly.

YOU? BUT YOU'RE AN OLD MAN, OLD ENOUGH TO BE THIS ONE'S FATHER.

"Do I look afraid?"

Instead of answering him, the voice said: THIS, EARTHMAN, IS THE WAY WE WORK. IF WE CAN BREAK YOU, AS WE HAVE BROKEN THE OTHERS. THEN WE INVADE. IF WE CANNOT—FOR INTERGALACTIC INVASION IS NO SIMPLE TASK, EVEN FOR US—WE SEEK ELSEWHERE FOR OUR NEW WORLDS. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

"I think so."

WE HAD ASSUMED THAT THESE HALF DOZEN WORLDS WOULD BE INDICATION ENOUGH, BUT IF YOU ARE FROM THE HOME PLANET...

"I'm ready," Mayhem said grimly. He looked at Harker Party, a completely broken man, babbling and drooling on the floor. It had been—certainly in no more than minutes—like a nervous breakdown. How? How had the aliens, who were not even

present in the flesh, achieved this? Mayhem did not know, but knew that it represented a science which mankind could not match.

Yet he stood—mankind's final barrier—before the alien onslaught.

ARE YOU READY,
EARTHMAN?

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"What are they going to do to you?" Sue-Ellen asked in a frightened voice. She could not get her eyes off the ruin of Harker Party.

Mayhem shrugged as the voice said: OUR WEAPONS ARE NOT PHYSICAL. WE USE MENTAL SUGGESTION. IF WE CAN CRUSH A REPRESENTATIVE OF A RACE, THEN WITH LITTLE MORE EFFORT WE CAN CRUSH THE ENTIRE RACE. YOU UNDERSTAND? THE FATE OF YOUR PEOPLE RESTS ON YOUR SHOULDERS.

My bony, old, ancient, battered shoulders, Mayhem thought.

It wasn't self-pity. Mayhem had never known a moment of self-pity in his life. It was for mankind.

He could almost hear the storied curfew tolling....

And then an intense wave of pain swept him up into an

incredible world which had no existence except in his head.

He was Johnny Marlow again, running in the Stygian depths of the Saggittarian planet's reeking jungle. Running, half-dead, pain-crazed. Fleeing hopelessly....

Death leered at him. Death squatted on his chest and breathed a reeking breath in his face.

He was swept up high above cliffs and thundering surf. He was dashed down toward the surf and felt the screaming pain in every atom of his being as he crashed against the rocks at the base of the cliff. He could feel the breaking of bones, the splintering, the splitting of flesh, the out-pouring of blood as if the instant of death were somehow prolonged for half an eternity.

He shuddered and died.

And was born again.

Fire engulfed him. Smoke, blinding, choking, beat him down. The fire came slowly, without wind, relentlessly. He ran. One small part of his mind knew he had not moved from the small room inside the spaceship. Mental suggestion—but completely, nightmarishly real. Mental suggestion which could break a man—or a whole race of men.

That one small part of his mind knew, but kept its secret: yes, the alien could win. Effortlessly, almost. It could break mankind as it had broken Harker Party, with mental suggestion.

The flames licked at him hungrily, bright red and searing. They engulfed him. He died.

And was born again—in quicksand.

He tried to fight his way clear, hysterically. An edge of panic seized him and he found he had to fight that more than the quicksand. He let himself sink. He remained calm, until only his head was above the sucking sands.

He tasted the sands in his mouth, felt them creep up his nostrils. His eyes were exactly on a level with the flat sand. He could see it stretching out to infinity. It covered his eyes. He could not breathe.

And so died.

Suddenly, he knew. Even if the aliens had a billion years to populate their Galaxy and even if it were somewhat less blessed with inhabitable worlds than ours, they should not exhaust the possibilities. Unless they lived for a long time.

Or forever.

Thus their mental sugges-

tion struck mankind at his weakest point—his mortality. Harker Party had died a hundred different ways—and had been broken.

They were killing Mayhem now, one way after another.

But Mayhem was a special man. They were immortal, the aliens. They reasoned—and logically—that mortal man would fear death as much as he feared anything. And so they conquered him by death, by multiple death, until he broke.

But Mayhem was a special man.

Mayhem, who had to die every thirty days.

Mayhem, who had almost forgotten what it was like to live a normal life, a life with death somewhere in the future, indeterminably but permanent.

Mayhem, who died once a month and was born again in another body. A dead man's body.

Mayhem, who knew death better than any man who had ever lived.

The aliens let him experience death in every form. Violent deaths and slow deaths and all of them as real as if they had actually happened. Poison, burning and searing and choking. And

floods of water, drowning.
Wild animals....

Slow starvation.

The sun, relentless, on a
desert world which never
was....

Cancer....

Slow bodily torture....

All the deaths mankind had
ever faced....

*Most of which Mayhem
had himself faced.*

Abruptly, he was seated
again in the small room. He
felt tired and old—not with
Stack Vermier's eighty years
and Stack Vermier's peaceful
in-sleep death. But old, old as
humanity itself, with all its
evanescent lives and all its
final deaths.

But the alien was beaten.
Somehow, he could sense that.
The alien had used every
weapon at its disposal, and
Mayhem survived. If a tired
old man of Earth could sur-
vive thus, what of younger
men, stronger men....?

The walls of the room
shimmered, faded, were
gone.

Mayhem blinked and stood
up. He was on the quay in
Three Forks Village. Near
him, Sue-Ellen was trying to
comfort Harker Party, but
the white-haired man said:

"I'm all right, I tell you.
What's the matter with you,
girl, stroking me like that?"

"Don't you remember? You
were hurt—on the space-
ship."

"Spaceship?" Party looked
up at the now empty sky. "I
told you there wasn't any
spaceship. Look for yourself,
whoever you are in Stack
Vermier's body!"

"He forgets," Sue-Ellen
cried. "He forgets!"

Mayhem nodded. "So do
the others."

It was true. The streets of
Three Forks Village were
crowded with bewildered
people.

"They were broken and
taken aboard the ship," May-
hem said. "I don't know why.
As slaves, perhaps. Or for
further experiments. But the
aliens have given up now.
They're on their way to re-
turn the populations of the
other frontier worlds, I fig-
ure."

"Thanks to you," Sue-El-
len said. "You beat them,
didn't you?"

"What ever are you talk-
ing about?" Harker asked.

"You wouldn't understand
now, Mr. Party. You'll never
understand," Sue-Ellen told
him. "I'm talking about a
legend. A living legend. I un-
derstand it now."

Mayhem poled the boat out
into the center of the river.

THE END

ENTRANCE EXAM

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

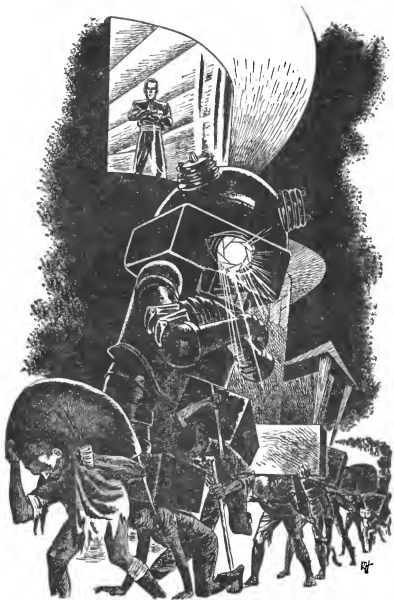
The Menials lived Outside where the chosen ones on the inside were forbidden to go. They were contacted only by robots that had to be thoroughly sterilized afterwards. The Menials were children of despair and desolation and were looked upon with contempt and loathing by the insiders. Discrimination? You ain't read nothin' yet!

LON JACSON, unable to suppress his boredom, dropped his stylo and walked to the window of his Ninetieth Floor office. He pressed a button and the window slid open, revealing the dark, moonless sky.

He looked out, smiling bitterly. The bright dots of light against the black velvet of the sky were stars, they said, and around them were other worlds. So they said; he would never know. Lon's world was Sector IV, in what had once been North America. Sector IV was a single huge building, a mile high and six miles square at its base. Lon had never been

Outside the Sector—not in all his twenty-four years.

He could barely make out the distant tower that was Sector III. They said the neighboring Sector was fifteen miles away, but to Lon it might just as well have been as far away as the stars. No one ever went Outside. Outside the Sector lived the Menials, the half-savage criminals and descendants of criminals condemned to farm and to supply fresh food to the Sectors in exchange for tools—the exchange being carried out by robots carefully sterilized before re-entering the Sector. For, in the Sectors, all disease had been



The Robot's cold eye watched the suffering men.

eliminated, and they did not dare risk contamination from Outside.

The buzzer sounded. Lon whirled, snapped on the phone, and watched as the familiar face of the Elder Preston swirled into view on the screen. Lon saluted.

"Yes, Elder Preston?"

The old man cleared his throat. "Just checking, Jackson. I noticed you didn't have your medic report in to me yet, and I thought I'd remind you that according to Regulations you've got only an hour before deadline. Better get moving!"

"Yes, sir," Lon said nervously. He returned reluctantly to his desk and took a report blank from a drawer. "Report for the period Feb. 1-30, 2716," he wrote hurriedly. "Sector IV. Health standards for this period were 99.07 of expectancy. Four accidents, all minor and suitably treated as described in attached transcripts. No other activity in Medic Bureau for this period. Sector IV remains in Health Percentile 98."

It's all unnecessary, he thought angrily while filling out the form. Nothing but an endless life of routine paperwork. And there's no way out.

He reached over and turned

up the wall-glow a bit. After a moment the light brightened, and he continued. "Report concluded subject to check. Lon Jackson 04168, Sector Medic cert. 2712."

There, he thought. He folded the report, gave it a cursory scanning, and dropped it into a gleaming metal-line container. He screwed the cap tight. On a sudden wild impulse he held the metalline to his lips and breathed on it. It clouded over.

"Good," he snorted mockingly. "That proves I'm alive." He dropped the container into the pneumotube on his desk and heard the click of the receiver. He tried to picture the thin, shiny tube dropping for ninety stories to the Low Floor, where the Elders worked. They checked and rechecked endlessly, as if deliberately trying to detect a medic in an error. They had caught Lon only once so far. That had been three years before, when he had been a raw recruit fresh from Medic University.

It had been Elder Preston, Lon recalled, who had summoned him. The stern old man had looked up at him from the comfort of his soft couch.

"Are you Jacson 04168?"

Lon remembered nodding stiffly. "Yes, sir."

"You're new on this job, aren't you?" snapped the Elder.

"Graduated from Medic University, 162nd Floor, certified in 2712, sir. Appointed early this year."

"You're mighty careless for a recruit," the old man said, holding out one of Lon's reports. "Look at this report."

Lon began to tremble. He took the sheet from the Elder and examined it. "It seems all right to me, sir."

"What color stylo did you fill it out with, Jacson?"

"Blue, sir," Lon said cautiously.

"Blue, eh? Have you ever read the Regulations? Do you know what the Regulation is covering color of ink on reports?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't think so. From now on, Jacson, make your reports to me out in *black*, understand? And read the Regulations tonight instead of taking your assigned Games period."

"Yes, sir," Lon said. He backed out timidly, feeling utterly terrified of the old man. It wasn't until he was out in the corridor that he

realized he *had* used a black stylo after all.

Later, the thought struck him that the whole incident had been fabricated, that the Elders had chemically altered the color of his writing for some reason of their own—probably just to give themselves an excuse for demonstrating their awesomeness to a frightened recruit. It was an idea he didn't dare broach to anyone; it smacked of subversiveness.

He ceased musing and walked out of the office, still revolving that incident of three years before in his mind. The photo-electric eye recognized him as he went out, and the door clicked softly shut behind him.

He had been assigned a Games period that evening, his first in over a month, and he was looking forward to his turn. The Games were the best of a poor lot of diversions. He walked down the long corridor, turning in at a glass door engraved "Psych."

He broke the photo-eye band and a soft bell rang inside. "Mart?" he called.

"A minute, Lon," came the answer from within. "Haven't sent my report down yet."

"Check. I'll wait out here." Jacson walked to the other

side of the wall and placed his hand over a gleaming red light. The wall parted and a bench appeared in the concealed alcove. He sprawled himself down.

In a few minutes Mart Drew 05138, Psych Bureau, came out of his office and the door closed behind him. "Hello, Lon."

Lon stepped out of the alcove. Instantly the bench slid back and the wall closed. "Hello, old man."

Mart, a tall young man bearing a sharp resemblance to Lon—after centuries of inbreeding, all men looked somewhat alike—nodded curtly. "Finish your report?"

"Just now," Lon said. "The usual stuff. I could have done it in my sleep. Medic Bureau never has any work; it's you Psych boys who have something to do, lucky devils!"

"Don't fool yourself, son," Mart Drew said. "It's not as exciting as you think. For half a credit I'd give the whole thing up, go Outside, and become a Menial!"

Lon chuckled. "I can just see it—you, swinging girders and breaking stones and pulling plows." He reached for Drew's hand and pinched the flesh of the palm. It turned a bloodless white and

then quickly became an angry red.

"You'd rip those hands to shreds in a day," Lon said. "You've done nothing harder than write reports all your life. Better stay in the Sector, where you belong."

Drew shook his head. "That's *not* where I belong, Lon. I want to get Outside—and I'm going to get there, sooner than you think. Just wait, and I'll show you!"

Lon looked at the Psych man, shocked despite himself. True, getting Outside was Lon's own secret dream, and he had many times cursed the walls that held him back, but he would never dare admit that out loud to anyone.

"Quiet, Mart! Suppose the Elders have this floor wired?"

"Suppose they do," Mart demanded. "They'll hear about me soon enough." They walked along silently for a while, then turned a corner in the corridor. Facing the wall, they took their positions and an invisible slit opened, revealing an elevator.

Mart drew out his Games Room assignment slip. "You have one of these for tonight too?"

"At long last," Lon said. "It's been weeks since my last turn down there."

"Same here," Mart said.
"But tonight's the night!"

They stepped into the elevator and the doors snapped shut. Lon felt his stomach sink as the numbers on the wall panel began to flick on and off. *Eighty-nine. Eighty. Seventy-six.*

Lon became almost hypnotized by the panel as the numbers dwindled. Finally, as they reached *Forty-two*, he said, "Are you really serious about going Outside?"

"Deadly serious," Drew replied grimly. "I want out."

"I wish you luck," Lon said. "But they'll never let you."

"We'll see about that," Mart said.

The elevator stopped at *Seventeen*. They got out and headed down the corridor to the Games Room. The entrance was crowded with dozens of others who had drawn assignments for that night.

"Games Room," came the cold, impersonal statement from the door robot. "May I see your platens, please?"

They laid the plastic coin-like identification tokens on the counter, where the scanner looked them over and recorded the names. "Recorded," the robot said. "Jacson

04168, Drew 05138, choose your Game." It drew away, motivated by photo-electric responses. Lon and Mart confronted a multitude of doors.

"This one," Mart said.

Lon nodded. "Suits me." They walked in.

The Game was before them, in a private room with the door sealed behind them. It was utterly silent inside.

"I've never seen this one before," Lon said. "How does it work? Or don't you know either?"

"Don't worry," Mart said confidently. "I've played this one already. It's a cinch, if you know the angles. You just roll those colored balls up the hill and swipe them with the lever so they drop into the holes of the right color."

He drew out a plunger. Five small metallic balls became visible. "You go first," Mart said. "I want to study the thing a little more."

Lon shrugged. "All right." He stepped up to the machine and pushed in the plunger. The red ball began to climb to the top of the slide.

"Now!" Mart yelled. Lon twisted a dial sharply. By remote control, a lever twenty feet away reached for the catapult and hurled the red

ball across the room into a waiting red-colored hole. It lit up with a satisfying glow.

"Good shot, Jacson," Mart said approvingly. "The black one, now!" Again the lever swooped down, again the click of metal meeting metal, again the flying pellet launched across the room. It ricocheted off a plate and settled into the black slot. Another light went up.

"That's two!"

Now the green one began to slide slowly up the catapult. Lon waited. In a split-second move he brought his wrist around. The green ball bounced from the far-off wall and settled in its hole. The third light lit up. With more than half the Game won, Lon felt a tingle of exultation.

"These last two are the hardest," Mart warned. "Especially the last; its motion curve is unpredictable."

The violet ball came barreling up to the top of the tube. A well-timed whack sent it flying into its proper position, and the fourth light lit. Only one unlit bulb stared nakedly at them.

The gold ball crawled up from the bottom of the slide, inching along at an agonizing snail's pace. Lon held the lever ready, waiting for the ball to reach the top.

Then, suddenly, everything blurred. The gold ball accelerated and shot past as Lon took a futile swipe at it; it hit the ceiling, fell back past the impotent lever into the catapult, and rolled down to its starting point. The other four balls dropped from their slots, and the light went out.

"I fumbled it," Lon said dejectedly. "Sorry, Mart."

"Don't let it bother you," Mart said. "We still have two more cracks at it—and we're going to make it. I haven't been waiting for this chance for weeks just to throw it away!"

He meant what he said. After fifteen minutes of tense action, Mart finally gave an expert flip to the speeding pellet, caught the gold ball at the height of its climb, and the fifth light burst at them from the wall.

A robot entered and slid over to them, staring blankly forward. "Congratulations on your skill," it said. "You may stop now and accept the customary reward, or go on to the next Game, as you prefer."

Lon exchanged a glance with Mart. The "customary reward" was a free hour, generally with extra lab privileges. Every time Lon

had won a Game, he had quit here, joyfully accepting the extra lab period. He didn't know what prize he might win if he proceeded to the next Game, but he did know he'd lose everything if he failed to win it.

"We'll quit here," Lon told the robot.

"Not me," Mart said. "I'm going on!" He looked at Lon. "How about you?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not," Lon said. He had what he wanted, and didn't care to risk losing it, not on the insane chance that he might be allowed Outside. "You go ahead, Mart. And—all the luck in the world, man."

"Thanks, Lon," Mart said. The robot led him through an inner door, which closed behind them.

At the beginning of the second period the next day Mart burst into Lon's office. Lon looked up from his work. "How'd it go?"

Mart was exultant. "I won! It was simple, ridiculously simple, and I won! Too bad you decided to call it quits."

"What's the prize?"

"Anything! I can have any request whatsoever. You know what I picked?"

"I can guess," Lon said.

"You asked for permission to go Outside. And they refused point-blank."

"Half right, Lon. I asked, true. But they *didn't* refuse! They approved the request immediately, and I'm to be allowed Outside for three periods today. Imagine, Lon—at last someone's getting a look at the Outside world!"

Lon stared up at his friend, unable to conceal his envy. After a while he said, "Let me know what it's like out there. I'm probably never going to make it myself."

"Will do." Mart looked at his watch. "Time to be going. I'll see you when I get back—and don't work too hard!"

"Don't worry about me," Lon said as Mart left.

Time for my lab period, he thought when the door closed. He was angry at himself for not having had Mart's boldness. All he had to show for his trip to the Games Room was some extra lab time, and Mart—and Mart—

It was incredible. The sternest regulation of all, being broken? Mart, going Outside? Lon shook his head.

He withdrew into the inner laboratory and surveyed his equipment. He examined his experiments-in-progress

boredly and sank down on a bench, feeling no desire at all to work. He decided he would do no research today. He'd read, instead.

Lon scribbled an order for a book, the same early history book he'd read during his last free period. It was a record of the strange, tormented, fascinating times before the Era of No Disease—the years before the Sectors were established and all of mankind placed in the enormous buildings.

He dropped the order into the pneumotube, and the book, wrapped in protectoplast, arrived almost immediately. Lon reached for it hungrily and began to read the story of those amazing years.

The chapter that most greatly interested him was the one on twentieth-century illnesses. Their names were weird, forbidding ones: tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, cancer, even something called the common cold, which, apparently, everyone had contracted regularly.

At the Medic University they had taught him how these diseases had gradually been conquered by man—the Salk Vaccine that wiped out polio, the Kennely Beam that ended the menace of cancer,

the Antihistamine drugs that had finished off the cold. All these things were on display at the Medical Museum on the Eighty-sixth Floor; none had been needed for centuries in Sector IV.

As the diseases were conquered, so, too, did man's resistance to them diminish. Thus the establishment of the Sectors, enclosures blocked off from any possible outside contamination.

Why, then, Lon asked himself, did the Elders allow Mart to go Outside, breaking the seal of sterility which was the whole reason for the Sector's existence? It made no sense at all.

Lon read for the rest of his free period, very much disturbed, and sent the book back down the tube. At the end of the hour he returned to his regular work. In two hours Mart would be back from Outside, and he was impatient to find out what it was like out there.

Minutes slipped off into tens of minutes, until it was almost time for Mart's return. Lon moved dreamily through his day's routine, waiting.

Suddenly the buzzer sounded, and Elder Preston's face appeared, even grimmer-looking than usual.

"Jacson? A diseased man is being brought back from Outside. He is on his way to your Bureau in a protective suit. Your orders are to confirm his condition and destroy him before he contaminates the entire Sector."

Shocked, Lon let his reflexes take over. Automatically he snapped a Safety Helmet over his face and sterilized his hands. None too soon, for the robots carried in a figure hidden in a bulky protective suit and placed him on the diagnosis table. They slid out, silently as they had come.

Without even looking, Lon knew who it was. Mart Drew, sneezing and coughing—the symptoms of the ancient common cold, a mere nuisance then but a deadly menace in the antiseptic world of Sector IV.

Why? Why had the Elders deliberately let him go Outside and contaminate himself so he would have to be destroyed?

The answer suddenly seemed obvious. *They wanted Mart out of the way.* They knew he had strange ideas, and they wanted to get rid of him. Lon came to an abrupt decision.

"You won't get away with it!" he shouted to the dead

screen. "I'm not going to play hangman for you! A Medic is supposed to cure, and I'm going to *cure* him."

He was trembling. He knew he would be disobeying an Elder's direct order by not removing the danger of disease immediately, but, oddly, he didn't care. Removing the danger meant killing Mart, the Elder seemed to think—and he wouldn't do it, not when it was possible to save him.

Elder Preston's face appeared on the screen. "Have you done it?" he asked.

"Not yet," Lon said. Defiantly he shut the screen off and burst through the door. *To hell with the Regulations,* he thought fiercely. *What's an Elder's order next to a man's life?*

He ran down the corridor as fast as legs rusty from disuse would take him. Scorning the elevator, he trotted down the stairs to the Eighty-sixth Floor and dashed around the corridor to the Medical Museum.

He moved quickly up and down among the cases, peering through the glass. Finally he found what he wanted—the Antihistamine syringe.

He hesitated for a moment, then lashed a fist at

the glass, smashing through without noticing the pain and the blood welling from his cut fingers, or the hiss of the escaping preservative gas. Lon reached in and seized the syringe, just as a pair of robots arrived on the scene.

He backtracked, dodged around them, and dashed up the stairs. He saw the confused robots collide as he ran by.

Breathless, he got back to his office and drew out the syringe. He began to open the protective suit.

The dinning of the alarm sounded in his ears, and someone in the distance was yelling something about quarantine, but he ignored it and proceeded to administer the cure.

Two hours later, he was sitting quietly in Elder Preston's office, calm and self-satisfied. He was not even frightened of the grim old man now.

"It was incredible, Jacson," the Elder said. "Shameful flaunting of the Regulations, near destruction of the entire Sector, exposure to illness—" The old man's horror and anger was evident on his face.

"I've explained to you

twice why I did what I did," Lon said. "I'll try once more. I had no intention of following your cruel and pointless order when it meant killing my friend, as long as it was in my power to save him."

"I know," the Elder said. "But don't you realize that it was necessary for the good of the entire Sector that the source of the danger be eradicated at once?"

Lon looked up angrily. "*Then why did you send him to me?* You knew what I'd do. Why not eradicate him yourself?"

The Elder smiled. "I'll tell you that later."

"Why don't you come to the point, Preston?" Lon snapped. He felt neither fear nor danger any more. He had already committed the most serious crime possible, and they could hardly kill him twice. "What are you going to do with me? What's my punishment? Get it over with quick, will you?"

"Your punishment?" A curious smile played over the old man's face. "Come here, Jacson. I want to show you something."

He opened the window-screen, and the stars were visible. The Elder gestured outward. "The stars," he said.

"So?"

"We've been building a ship, down here on the lower levels. A ship to go to the stars. It needs a crew, and colonists for a new world. Colonists must be clever men, individual thinkers, flexible, bold, men capable of acting in an emergency and breaking rules when necessary. We don't have many of those men any more. Our life here has become too well regulated; there are no challenges. Men grow soft here. Ingenuity gets bred out."

"What does this have to do with me?" Lon asked impatiently.

"When there are no challenges," the Elder continued, ignoring him, "we have to invent some. We see to it that a man has a chance to go Outside, and we watch his reaction. We put other men in positions of inner conflict, and see what they do. Some fail; others don't."

Mart Drew entered the room.

"Mart passed the test the other day, when he requested permission to go Outside. That was the bold act that told us he was a potential colonist. Then we trumped up this little charade for you today. We've been watching

you for three years, hoping you'd develop into colonist material."

Suddenly Lon's knees felt weak.

"The whole thing—Mart's cold, everything, all just a game—?"

"Not a game, Lon," the Elder said. "Call it an entrance exam. And you've passed. You're the sort of man we need to build our colony."

He pointed through the window at the twinkling blackness of the sky. "I'm sorry we had to fool you, but now the stars are waiting for you. I wish I could go with you. Good luck, out there," he said, and his wrinkled face suddenly no longer looked stern, but merely very tired.

Lon looked at Mart, and then back to the Elder. "How do I know that this isn't another game, some other kind of exam itself?"

"Not this time," the Elder said, smiling. "The ship blasts off tomorrow."

It was only when the massive Sector IV building had become a tiny dot on the rapidly dwindling landscape below and the sky was drawing near that Lon really believed him.

THE END

GAMBLER'S PLANET

By GORDON AGHILL

Step into a world where the gambling den instead of the church is sanctuary for the criminal; where gambling is a religion; where murderers may stand shoulder to shoulder with saints. Where Chance is All and the words "I'll bet my life!" are taken literally.

CLINT CONRAD stepped out of the landing elevator and paused for a moment in the shadow of the tall, golden spaceship, breathing the rich, sweet air of Bellatrix VI. He looked out past the spaceport depot. There, bathed in the blue-white radiance of the sun, he saw the gambling city of Karvallis, a glittering array of buildings that sprawled over the crest of a rolling hill.

He fingered the hundred-credit piece in his pocket. The solitary disk of tungsten was all that he had left of the expense money that Cantelli had given him.

There'll be more in that



The ray glittered



brightly on the thousand-to-one shot!

pocket when I leave here, he promised himself.

A porter appeared from the other side of the ship and approached him. "Would you like to have your luggage transferred to a hotel in the city, sir?" The porter's skin had been burned almost black by the fierce ultraviolet radiation of Bellatrix.

"Sorry," Clint said, indicating the little travelling bag at his side. "I'm travelling light. This is all I've got, and I can manage it well enough by myself."

"Certainly, sir."

Clint moved on down the field to the depot, a short, stubby building at the far end of the field. He checked out and signalled to a jetcab driver.

"Going to Karvallis," he told the driver.

"Now where else *would* you be going, on this planet?" said the cabbie boredly. "Hop in."

Clint climbed into the back seat of the jetcab, and it began to roll slowly toward the road to Karvallis. Just as the cab started into high, a blaster shot ripped through the rear window.

Clint turned and saw a tall man in a dull-green uniform replace a smoking blaster in its holster and leap into a nearby jetcar.

"Step on it, cabbie! Someone's after me!"

"Why'd you have to pick my car, buddy?" the cabbie grumbled. "I've got enough trouble without getting mixed up in this sort of stuff." He hit the throttle and the cab sped down the road.

Someone in the pursuing car fired again. The shot went low and pushed up a divot in the roadbed. Frantically, the cabbie upped the acceleration to maximum safety.

"Who are those guys?" Clint asked.

"You an outworlder?" the driver said, maintaining his air of boredom despite everything.

"First time in my life I've been here," Clint said truthfully. "And no sooner did I leave the spaceport but that fellow in green took a pot-shot at me. I ask you—is that hospitality?"

The cab whirled around a hairpin curve and flew madly toward the approaching city. "Those boys are the local police," the cabbie said. "Someone must have hired them to rub you out. I wish you'd picked someone else's cab to get rubbed out in, though."

"Sorry," Clint said. "If I'd known this was going to happen I'd have checked with you

about it first." Another blast clipped a fender.

"Can't you make this thing go any faster?"

"We're breaking the law now, fellow. Besides, you're almost in town. And if you can make it to a casino, you'll be all right so long as you don't come out."

Sure, Clint thought. If I can make it.

The gambling casinos on Bellatrix VI were virtual sanctuaries; gunplay of any sort, even on the part of the police, was strictly forbidden. It was the most sacred item in the Karvallis code of honor. The inside of a casino was sacrosanct.

The problem, Clint thought, is how to get out of this cab and into a casino without getting blasted.

They whirled down into what seemed to Clint Conrad must be the main street of Karvallis, a wide, glittering avenue studded with imposing gambling palaces. Traffic obligingly pulled to one side as they sped down the street, with the police car not far behind.

Another blaster shot whistled through the rear window, over Clint's head, past the cabbie's right ear, and out through the windshield. The cabbie turned.

"This is about as far as we go, friend. My cab's getting too badly shot up to suit me. The insurance is only going to cover half the damage as it is."

"How are you going to stop?"

"I'm not," said the cabbie. "You're going to jump. I'm going to turn a side street and let you out, and you're on your own from there."

"How about my luggage?"

"Don't worry about it, friend. I'll get it back to you." He smiled. "If you're still alive to claim it, that is."

Then another shot pinged through the window.

"Come on — out."

The cab flashed around a corner and down a dingy, dark side street. The police car behind them screeched around the corner also.

Clint worked the door open. "Slow down a little, will you? The jump'll kill me at this speed."

"I'll do the best I can," the cabbie said. "But they must want you real bad."

"It's all some big mistake," Clint protested. "They don't even know me."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Jump here, or else I'll just have to stop and turn you over to them myself. My cab is starting to look like a sieve."

"All right," Clint growled. The cabbie slowed down just a bit, and in one smooth motion Clint threw the door open, jumped out, rolled as the sidewalk rushed up to meet him, and landed running. He pounded down a lonely-looking alleyway, feeling as if he'd broken both his ankles.

What the hell's going on? he wondered. I land here a perfect stranger and before I take two steps the police are after me, blazing away like I was a mad dog.

Cantelli said it would be a nice, easy job, he thought, as he dashed down the seemingly endless alley. Just land on Belatrix VI, see his man, take over the job. Sure. So as soon as I get here, I'm a clay pigeon for the local constabulary.

He heard footsteps behind him—his pursuers were catching up. He fumbled at his waist for the blaster that wasn't there, and ducked into a darkened door. He jangled the latch, saw that the door was locked, and flattened himself against the closed door, waiting expectantly.

Two men dashed past, blasters drawn. Then a third. After a moment, a fourth came along, apparently wearied from the long run. As he passed by, Clint stepped out

of the doorway and stood just behind him.

"Allow me to introduce myself," Clint said, chopping the side of his hand against the other's throat. The policeman groaned softly and sank to the ground. Clint grabbed his blaster and started running back the way he came.

After about ten steps he glanced up ahead and heard the sound of footsteps thudding toward him. Reinforcements? He didn't know. He ducked into the nearest doorway again, and this time the door was unlocked.

He stumbled up the flight of stairs that presented itself. At the top of the stairs was a door. He pushed it open and heard the sound of loud, excited laughter.

Inside was a horde of masked, richly-dressed people, clustered around gaming tables. By all that's holy, Clint thought, I've blundered right into a gambling casino — a sanctuary!

He was safe. Safe until he went outside again.

He flipped his hundred-credit piece. As long as that held out, he could stay. If the house cleaned him out, he'd have no choice but to go back outside and start running.

Run where? Run to whom? There was no safety outside.

They were chasing him, and they were shooting for keeps. A stranger on a strange world, and they were hunting him.

In thirty-six hours Cantelli would arrive. The mysterious, swarthy man who had offered him the job on Bellatrix VI had told him he'd land on the next ship. And the next ship in from Kandoris would be down in thirty-six hours.

Cantelli could clear him. But he'd have to hold out in this casino until Cantelli's ship got here, until he could get to Cantelli and have him explain that it was all a mistake, that they were hunting the wrong man.

He tossed the hundred-credit piece lightly in the air and caught it. He was going to have to parlay those hundred credits into enough of a stake to hold him against the house for thirty-six hours. And that was pretty good playing, in Karvallis.

He walked on in.

An attendant bustled up to him, offering a silvery, blank face-mask. "Your mask, sir," he said. "And may I see proof of your intentions?"

Conrad knew what the man meant. His intention to gamble. You don't walk into a casino on Bellatrix VI simply

to kibitz, and you need money to gamble.

He showed the hundred-credit coin, and the attendant nodded. "Very good, sir. Now if you'll don the mask — "

The mask covered all of Clint's head except his chin and mouth. The silvery plastic was transparent from the inside, so that he could see out, but to someone else his face presented only a blank, shining mirror.

"The bar is at the rear, sir," said the attendant. Clint nodded and headed into the gaming room.

The crowd displayed a glittering array of masked heads. There would be no way for the police to know which person in that crowd was Clint Conrad.

He had a day and a half to use up in the casino before Cantelli arrived, so there was not any sense in starting to gamble before he had to. He'd probably be allowed to wander around for a few minutes before he would have to start playing. He headed for the bar for a free drink. The management could afford to indulge their patrons — they didn't need to sell drinks to make money.

He ordered a glass of the smooth but potent *ordlik* and sipped he pale golden liquid

while he thought over what he'd have to do.

The cops were looking for somebody. That was obvious. Here on Bellatrix VI, it was considered perfectly permissible to hire the police to do a rub-out job. It cost money, but it could be done.

The only thing he could figure was that they had mistaken him for someone else. He knew damned good and well that he hadn't done anything to anyone on Bellatrix VI.

Or had he? Wait a minute, now. He did know one person from Karvallis: George Cantelli. Cantelli had claimed that he was a prominent businessman on Bellatrix — running an insurance concern, or more accurately, a protection outfit. Cantelli had signed Clint on to direct branch operations in Karvallis.

Now, suppose Cantelli and his outfit are especially unpopular in Karvallis. So unpopular that someone would be interested in hiring the police to eradicate the new local chief.

He whistled softly. It sounded logical enough.

They play it rough here, he thought.

A smiling attendant glided up to him. The attendants

were the only figures in the casino without masks.

"If there's any particular game you prefer, sir," the attendant purred, "I'll be glad to get a space for you."

Clint nodded. "Fine," he said. "I think I'll try Swirly."

They don't waste much time here, he thought wryly. *They don't want people just standing around.*

He followed the attendant to the Swirly table. He handed the little man the hundred-credit piece and asked for a hundred white chips. "That'll do to start," he said, implying that he had plenty more where that came from.

Seven gamblers were playing around the Swirly table, watching the pool of white light that floated in its center. The screen above the table flickered as the odds on the various positions changed.

In front of him were eight keys, representing the eight geometric figures that would appear in the light pool when every player had made his bet. The keys were hooded so that the other players could not see which stud was depressed.

Clint put a chip in the receiving slot and watched the odds on the eight figures change on the screen. He had to pick the most favorable

odds and punch the key at exactly the right time.

Triangle hit a hundred-to-one, and Clint's left index finger jabbed down on the *triangle* button before the odds changed.

The other six men were watching, too, and each one pressed when he thought the odds were right. When the last one had indicated his choice, the pool of light in the center of the table began to change color subtly. Greens and yellows appeared, swirling around in the pool like slow-moving eddy currents. A streak of red faded in, followed by shades of violet and blue. They swirled faster and faster, melting together into a blur of color. Then they began to take form. They slowed again, and some of the colors faded.

Finally, there was nothing in the light-pool but a brilliant blue circle. The robotic computers below snickered a little as they checked the odds on *circle*. Clint had lost the first play.

Two more credits went the same way. Then Clint hit a winner on *hexagon*, paying twenty-to-one. A stream of chips fell into the pay slot. He scooped them out and let them trickle into his pocket.

Clint decided he'd give the

machine another try. It did seem like a perfectly honest, random-selection game, and he felt pleased that nothing was being rigged. Then he realized that on a planet where crime was legal, any casino operating an obviously crooked gambling machine would be out of business pretty quick.

He studied the board again. *Triangle* had missed, *hexagon* had paid off. He decided to make a series of bets to see if there was any detectable pattern to the game.

He took *diamond* at 2-1 and lost; he tried *triangle* again at 5-1 and won. Then he tried *triangle* immediately afterward, catching it at 72-1, and lost.

Hexagon cost him at 12-1, then brought him a pleasant 16-1, then lost at 4-1. He played *circle* for a while and lost four straight bets, 7-1, 25-1, 6-1, 11-1. The last one bothered him. He had been sure *circle* would come up after so many successive losses, but it didn't.

Clint paused to take stock of his holdings. He was thirty-one credits to the good of where he'd started. Fine, he thought. I can play this game all week without ever losing too much or winning much. That way I'll be able to last

out the thirty-six hours till Cantelli's ship puts down.

"Doesn't this sort of chickenfeed game bother you?" said a man standing next to him, in a friendly voice. Clint turned and stared at the man's mask, seeing his own reflection.

"It does get pretty dull," Clint admitted. He didn't care to start an argument.

"You notice most of the winners are low ones. If the machine can collect a credit each from the seven players and only dish out at 6-1 or so, they're still a credit to the good. But I don't think the Swirly's much of a money-maker for them. It's strictly small time business."

"You're right there, friend," Clint said.

"How about coming over to the Roto table with me?" the stranger said. "That's where the big money's to be picked up."

Clint jingled his chips together. 131 credits. That could melt awfully fast at a Roto table, and as soon as his money was gone he'd be dumped out in the alley with the police—or the hired assassins, which was the same thing—chasing him again.

"Well—"

"You're not afraid, are you?" the other said genially.

"You don't strike me as the type of man who plays for chickenfeed all the time. We don't like that kind of man here."

Clint frowned beneath his mask. He didn't want to trust his few credits to the Roto table, but he did not dare show himself afraid to gamble, either.

"All right, brother. Let's take our chances at Roto."

Clint squeezed the chips together in his pocket.

The stranger led him to the Roto table. In the middle of the table was a great rotating wheel; its surface was completely covered with numbers. When the wheel stopped, a sharp beam of light focused on it from above and singled out the winning number. If you had bet on that number, everyone else at the table paid you the number you'd picked—if you'd bet on 10, everyone kicked in 10 credits to you. Besides that, everyone paid the house the amount of his own losing number.

That way it made sense to pick a high number, because the payoff was so much greater. If you cashed in on 100 and there were fifty people at the table, that meant 5000 quick credits. The only trouble was that if 100 lost, you had

to hand the croupier a fat 100 credits plus whatever the winner had earned.

If you bet high, you could win a fortune—provided you had a fortune to start with.

Clint and his new friend joined the crowd at the table. The other immediately put his chip down on 80, which stamped him as being fairly well-heeled. The numbers ran from 1 to 500, but bets in the upper level were rare.

Clint studied the board and decided to pick something low, as a starter. He chose 11, feeling a little embarrassed when he realized it was the second lowest bet on the board, topping only someone's 8.

"You must be in almost as bad shape as I am, friend," said a warm, soft voice at his left. Clint turned and saw the masked figure of a girl—probably a four-planet knockout if her concealed face was even half as good as what was visible of the rest of her. She was wearing a clinging, translucent off-the-bosom gown cut almost to her navel, leaving the left breast bare, and her deeply-tanned throat was decorated with glittering span-gles.

"I take it that 8 is your bet," Clint said.

"Exactly right, brother," said the girl. "I'm in rather

poor straits tonight. Had some heavy expenses recently."

The wheel began to turn, whirling faster and faster. Finally it stopped, and the light singled out a number.

436.

Clint gasped for a moment, then stared up at the far end of the board and saw that no one had bet 436. If someone had been covering the number, he'd not only have been cleaned out, he'd be heavily in debt.

The wheel started up again. This time it landed on 72, which was likewise unoccupied.

"This game's rough on the nerves," Clint commented.

"Not if you're used to it," said the girl. Her voice was a throaty, exciting one.

Outside the casinos, the citizens of Bellatrix VI were cautious in their contacts with strangers. They were tight-lipped and wary. But in the gaming rooms, they loosened up. There was no way of knowing who you were talking to, so there was no need to follow the strict formality necessary on the outside.

There was only one formality that was rigidly adhered to: it was absolutely forbidden to reveal your own identity or to question another

about his identity. You could not admit knowing another's identity, even if he were your best friend.

Clint played 25. The light beam flickered around the moving wheel. A relay clicked.

"Twenty-five!" said the girl. "That's the first winner in the last five minutes. Congratulations!"

Clint grinned. He hadn't expected to win; he'd just about decided to get back to the Swirly table after one more play, but this changed his status considerably. There were eighty-one players around the table—better than two thousand credits!

As blue chips clicked into the pay slot, Clint casually pulled them out. Then he heard a man's voice say—it was the same stranger who had led him to the Roto table in the first place—

"Have you heard? According to Sedrik, Sam Felks is back in Karvallis."

"I thought he was off-planet," said someone else.

"He was. But he landed at the spaceport less than an hour ago."

"Wait till Larissa hears of that," the second man said, chuckling.

The first grinned. "Evidently, she already has. The cops are gunning for him now. He

got away in a cab, but they've blocked off the city."

"If he's smart, he'll go into a casino."

"Sure, but how long can you stay in one of these places? He'll have to leave eventually. He's not going to have any rigged machines to keep him winning this time."

Clint Conrad now casually played number fifty. He tried to keep his face calm. The realization had suddenly come that they were talking about *him*! Or rather, they thought he was someone named Sam Felks.

"Rigged machines?" said a woman's voice. Clint glanced casually at her. She was a heavy-set matron in her late forties, he guessed.

"You say this man used rigged machines?" she continued. "What happened?"

"You hadn't heard? He cheated Larissa out of better than a hundred thousand credits."

"I'm sorry," the big woman said, "but I'm from Medlis City. I hadn't heard any of this."

"It happened about three years ago. Sam Felks left for points unknown when Larissa's friends found out about the swindle. God only knows why he came back."

"Won't he be recognized?" asked the woman.

"He didn't think so," said the first man. "He's had surgery on his face, I understand."

Clint had lost his bet on 50. He covered 12 and tried to hear more of the conversation, but the trio broke up and drifted apart into the crowd.

So that was it. He had been mistaken for a man who had cheated in a gambling game. No wonder the police were up in arms against him.

The wheel circled and came to rest on 12. Sixty-nine players contributed 12 credits each. That gave him 828 more. He was pushing 3000 credits now.

"Doing pretty well, big man," said the girl in the low-cut dress. Clint looked around and saw a considerable number of people staring curiously at him, perhaps wondering who the lucky player was.

"Join me for a drink?" she suggested.

"I'd hate to quit now," Clint said. "Not while I'm hot."

She chuckled. It was a light, musical sort of laugh. "Are you joking? You've hit the rotor twice in half an hour, and you expect to hit it again?

You know the record, don't you? Cantelli hit the rotor four times in three hours of steady play. But I don't think your bankroll matches his, yet."

"You're right," Clint said. "I'll quit for a while and snaffle a beverage or two with you."

He guided her through the crowd to the bar, feeling the pleasant sensation of the heavy jingling of the chips in his pocket and the even more pleasant sensation of the girl's nearness.

They ordered two double geburs. Clint tipped the bartender with a chip, and the drinks arrived quickly.

He sipped his drink reflectively, watching the shifting colors of the polychrome chandelier playing over her bare, warm-looking skin.

Someone named Larissa had paid the police to blast Sam Felks as soon as he set foot on Bellatrix VI. And the police thought he was Sam Felks.

If he could hold out till Cantelli came, fine.

But perhaps, now that he had some cash, he could outbid the police.

"I suppose you know Sam Felks is back," Clint said.

"That cheater!" snapped the girl. "Yes, I'd heard. But the cops'll get him quick enough. Larissa's ordered that

they get him as soon as his ship lands."

He finished his drink and set it down. "You said Cantelli holds the Roto record here. I guess that must have been quite a feather in his cap."

"The way you talk, you must be a stranger here."

"I am," Clint confessed.

"I thought everybody knew what sort of party Cantelli threw after he hit the fourth time. He hit 497, with eighty-six on the table."

Clint made a rough computation and whistled. "That got his around 40,000 credits, didn't it?"

"And it was his fourth hit of the night. He threw a party for all the losers. It went on for three days."

"Quite a boy, this Cantelli," Clint said.

"He certainly is," the girl agreed, and Clint could tell from the way she said it that there probably was something between Cantelli and the girl.

"You don't know Cantelli at all?" she asked.

"I never said that, did I? Matter of fact, I encountered your Cantelli in a business deal on another planet. At least, I think it's the same one."

"There's only one Cantelli," the girl said. "And you can

recognize him easily enough. What did your man look like?"

Clint thought for a moment, trying to reconstruct the appearance of the man who had hired him on Kandoris II.

"Oh, he's—well, about my height, square jaw, dark skin, wavy hair—"

"How about the eyes?" the girl prompted.

Clint snapped his fingers, annoyed at his forgetfulness. "Of course! How could I forget that? One eye was brown, his other was green. It's the first thing I noticed about him."

"That's the one," the girl said. "A real prince, isn't he?"

"I liked him," Clint said.

"He should be coming back soon," she said. "You know, he went out after Sam Felks. I don't know where he is, but he was the one who tipped off the police that Felks was on his way back here with a new face. Soon as they blast Felks, I suppose Cantelli will be back."

"You say Cantelli is the one who tipped them off that Felks was coming here?" Clint asked. The girl nodded.

"Umm. That's interesting. Have another drink," he said.

So Cantelli had sent word ahead that Felks was coming

back? And the police thought *he* was Felks? Something was wrong somewhere. Cantelli had deliberately identified him, Clint Conrad, as Sam Felks, so Clint would be shot as soon as he landed. And Cantelli himself planned to return immediately after.

That left the real Sam Felks unaccounted for. Where was he? What was Cantelli's motive in sending a complete stranger to his death, while Sam Felks would remain at large and now unpursued?

Suddenly all the pieces began to click together. He suddenly downed his drink at a gulp, and the girl did likewise.

"Let's go back to the Roto again," he suggested.

"If you want to," she said. He put his arm around her, but she shrugged lightly out from under the contact.

"Uh-uh. That belongs to a better man than you, friend."

Clint nodded. "All right. I'll respect property rights." They headed back to the table.

As they threaded through the crowd, Clint began to fit his explanation together. Cantelli had left Bellatrix to get Felks, who had cheated a girl named Larissa, probably Cantelli's girl. But when Cantelli had caught up with Felks, it

had been Cantelli who came off second best. Felks had killed him and had himself surgically transformed into a replica of Cantelli.

Then, as Cantelli, he had hired the first adventurer to come along and sent him to Bellatrix VI. And, still posing as Cantelli, he had contacted this Larissa and told her that Felks was returning. He had given her Clint's description, and she had paid the police to get Clint as soon as he put down on Bellatrix.

That meant the "Cantelli" who was coming on the next ship was in reality a surgically-disguised Felks. It would hardly be possible for Clint to persuade Cantelli-Felks to clear him when he arrived.

So where did that leave Clint Conrad? Bribe the police? How much would it take? He didn't know. Besides, he'd probably be overbid by Larissa. He couldn't hope to survive for long on a planet, where he was believed to be a man who had violated the most sacred of that planet's social codes. Unless he could do some brilliant thinking and do it fast, Clint Conrad was going to die on Bellatrix VI.

The girl had led him back to the Roto table. "I'll watch you play a while," she said. "I'm running pretty low."

"I'll stake you," Clint said. "I think you're bringing me luck tonight."

They each picked a number and watched the wheel spin under the flickering, searching light beam. Clint really felt as though his mind were spinning along with it.

If he could prove that the man coming in on the next ship was really Felks instead of Cantelli, he might be able to get out of this mess with a whole skin. But how could he do that?

Felks had been on Kandoris II, where the School of Psycho-surgeons had originated. With mental experts like that to call on, Felks had undoubtedly been able to have the memory content of Cantelli's brain transferred to his own before he killed Cantelli. He would have had to—otherwise he'd never be able to masquerade successfully as Cantelli on Bellatrix VI.

Clint's number lost, but the girl, who had played number one just for the fun of it, took in seventy-three credits.

"It looks like you're good luck for me, too," she said, smiling up at him.

"Yeah," said Clint. "I just hope I'm good luck for me, too." Four more times he fed chips in, picking numbers at

random. Once, someone down the table caught 237, but this time Clint had enough to cover it.

He put his money on another number and watched more chips go down the drain.

What was he going to do? Would it be better to make a run for it? But where would he go? If he could only prove that Cantelli was really Felks. But how?

Suddenly a commotion that began among the other players broke his train of thought. "Hey!" the girl's voice said. "You're really hitting them tonight!"

Clint blinked. He had played 318 — and won! It paid off over twenty thousand credits!

Fat lot of good that will do me, he thought.

Someone walked up behind the girl. "The police have the place surrounded. They have traced Sam Felks here. I suppose Larissa will hear about it pretty soon."

The girl jerked her head around. "In here?" she repeated incredulously. Then she moved her head around as though she were trying to see past the silvery mirrors of the masks. "Thanks," she told the man.

"A pleasure," he said, moving off.

Things began to click in Clint's mind. It was as though he had been face to face with the answers all the time, but had been unable to see the obvious because of the turmoil in his own brain.

He knew how he could identify Sam Felks — that was easy. And now, of course, he knew that the girl standing next to him was Larissa. He should have seen it, the way her voice grew warm when she mentioned Cantelli.

"Record!" someone shouted. "Record! He's beaten the record!"

Clint jerked his head 'round to see what had happened. The other Roto players all had their blank, mirror faces turned toward him. He looked at the table.

He had played 411, almost absent-mindedly, and had won to the tune of over thirty-five thousand credits! An amazing run of luck.

Clint scooped the chips out of the pay slot and grinned at the people around the table. "That's all for me tonight. I'll try some other game," he said. "You can help me spend some of this later." He turned to the girl. "I want to talk to you somewhere."

She was looking up at him, and Clint wished he could see

the eyes behind that silvery reflection.

"Sure," she said. "Sure." Her breasts rose and fell.

Someone at the table said softly: "Four times in less than two hours! Why, that beats Cantelli's record!"

He led the girl back into the bar and picked up a couple of drinks. Then he took her to a fairly secluded booth.

"What do you want?" she asked. Clint detected not only curiosity in her voice, but a tinge of something else.

Clint watched her mouth, trying to detect any change of emotion as he said: "Larissa is looking for Sam Felks. I wonder if she would appreciate it if I told her how she could lay her hands on him?"

"Felks is in here," she said calmly. "When he comes out, the police will get him. That's all Larissa is asking for."

"As I understand it, Larissa wants Felks dead because he swindled her. Do you think she'd be interested if Felks had killed someone?"

She knew by this time that Clint was aware of her identity. "Whom did he kill? I wouldn't put anything past that—that—"

Clint didn't want to have to tell her like this, but it was the only way he could save his own neck.

"Let's suppose something," he said. "Let's suppose you knew me and trusted me. I'm going to tell you a story, and I want you to be very calm and just listen. I don't want you to do anything until you have had a chance to think."

She smiled bitterly. "I have not done anything yet, have I? If I was the touchy type, I'd have blown up several minutes ago, when I found out that Sam Felks was in this building."

She knew, then, who he was—or thought she did.

"All right, then, listen," he snapped. "And think about what I'm saying. See if it makes sense. Don't jump to conclusions."

He pointed a finger at her. "Sam Felks took off with Larissa's money three years ago. She wouldn't have minded the loss, but she'd been cheated. So she got Cantelli to go after him.

"Sam chased all around the Galaxy for a while, knowing that Cantelli was on his tail. Finally, they came together on Kandoris II. Sam somehow managed to trap Cantelli and have Cantelli's memory transferred to his own mind. Then he had his face surgically altered to look like Cantelli.

"He wanted to come back to Bellatrix VI, you see. But,

in order to make sure he'd always be safe, he had to have Sam Felks out of the way. So he hired a man by the name of Clinton Conrad for a job here in Karvallis by posing as Cantelli.

"Conrad didn't suspect a thing. But Felks meanwhile sent a subradio message to Larissa saying that Conrad was Felks. He knew what Larissa would do, and he figured that Conrad would be dead by the time he got here."

The girl's mouth tightened. "That's the most fantastic story I've heard in years." Then she paused. "If that's true, what happened to Cantelli?"

"I don't know," Clint said levelly. "But I suspect he's dead."

There was a long silence. When the girl spoke again, her voice was low and husky. "You're saying that the man in this casino is just who he pretends to be—Clinton Conrad. I think he's just a filthy swindler by the name of Sam Felks who'd do anything to get out of a trap. Even to telling—"

"Even to telling a woman that her lover was dead," Clint finished. "I agree with you. Right now there's no way of knowing. But Larissa can't afford to take a chance. Sup-

pose—just suppose—that she kills the wrong man. She'd never be sure again about Cantelli. She would eventually realize that he wasn't, but by then it might be too late."

"I—I see what you mean," she said slowly.

"Now," Clint went on, "I have a suggestion. 'Suppose Conrad were to show up out in front of this casino of his own free will. If Larissa were to tell the cops that he was to be taken alive, she'd have him right where she wanted him. He would come out unarmed and with better than fifty thousand credits on him. If he is Sam Felks, Larissa could have him killed at any time and get back half the money Sam swindled at the same time.'"

"Suppose he really is Conrad," she asked. "How could he prove it?"

"By proving that the man Larissa thinks is Cantelli is really Felks."

"How would he do that?" she demanded.

"Answer a few questions," Clint said. "Did Sam Felks have brown eyes?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Conrad's eyes are brown, too," Clint said.

She laughed harshly. "I hardly see how that proves Conrad's point."

"Cantelli has one green eye," Clint went on. "And that is one thing that surgery will not do. You can't change a man's eye pigmentation—and especially you can't bleach the color. That only leaves two things, assuming that Felks is masquerading as Cantelli. One: he could have a new eyeball put in. But that means he'll be blind in that eye; the optic nerve would be severed, and that sort of nerve tissue doesn't grow back.

"Two: he could be wearing a colored contact lens.

"Therefore, if the man who lands in that ship tomorrow is blind in his green eye or is wearing a contact lens, he's Felks."

The girl nodded slowly. "I see what you mean. Very well. If Conrad will be out there in ten minutes—unarmed and with the money—Larissa will be waiting for him. But if he's a phony, he'll wish he'd just let the cops shoot him down. There are worse ways to die." The silver mask stared at him for a long moment, and then she stood up and walked off.

Clint took a deep breath. He wasn't out of the woods by a long way, but he could see daylight ahead. He pulled out the blaster he'd stolen from the cop he'd hit and pushed it down between the wall and the

seat of the booth. Then he went to the cashier and cashed his chips. When he stepped out of the front door with his hands away from his sides, there were four blasters staring him in the face.

One of the cops stepped up and frisked him. He pulled out the sheaf of thousand-credit notes. Then he turned. "It's okay. He's clean."

Then the girl stepped out of the shadows. Clint saw that without the mask she was a redhead with the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. And her face matched all the rest of her.

"All right, Clinton Conrad," she said. "You're going to jail. And you're going to wait there for the next spaceliner to come in." Then she stopped and looked him up and down. "If you are Sam Felks, I must say you're certainly an improvement over the old model." She turned and walked off.

"Okay, Mr. Conrad," said one of the cops. "Let's go."

Thirty-odd hours later, Clint Conrad was standing in the shadows of the spaceport building at Karvallis, squinting his eyes against the merciless glare of brilliant Bellatrix.

High in the sky a faint whistle made itself heard, a

whistle that rose to a piercing whine as the intersellar vessel descended. Then the whine died, the great golden ship floated down and settled itself into its berth.

"You understand, don't you?" one of the cops asked. "You'll stay out of sight. Miss Larissa will go out to meet Cantelli. She'll bring him past us and we'll cover him while we test that eye of his. If it's a phony, you're clear. If it's a good eye—" He paused and levelled the blaster meaningfully. "And if you try to get away, or make any funny moves at all—"

"I get you," said Clint. He was watching the redheaded girl walk toward the spaceship through the crowd. He couldn't see what took place near the ship, but she reappeared a short time later. Cantelli-Felks was with her.

Clint turned his back as they approached. He didn't want the swindler to catch a glimpse of him. Larissa was going to tell him that Sam Felks was dead.

As they walked by the cluster of policemen, two of them stepped out and shoved blasters into his ribs.

"Our apologies, Mr. Cantelli," said one of the policemen. "There seems to be some

slight misunderstanding. We are merely doing our duty under the Bribery Laws."

Cantelli-Felks' face lost color. "What do you want?"

Clint stepped into his line of vision. "We want to see that green eye of yours, Felks."

Felks was not slow-thinking by a long shot—nor was he slow-acting. His arm, which has been around Larissa, pulled her in and held her tight against him.

The cops' fingers tightened on the triggers of their blasters, then relaxed. They couldn't shoot. If they did, the beams would go right through Felks and kill Larissa.

Felks' free hand jerked a blaster out of his jacket.

"Drop the guns," he said harshly. Larissa didn't even struggle. Clint watched, white-faced. He could see by her shocked expression that up to this moment she had really believed this man to be Cantelli. If she had really believed Clint, she'd never have gone close enough to Felks to be grabbed.

Felks began to back away, holding the girl in front of him as a shield. Her eyes were still wide with shock.

The crowds drew back respectful and then ignored

what was going on. None of this, after all, was any business of theirs.

Suddenly, Larissa came to life. The eyes that had looked so dazed began to burn with a terrible hatred. She looked at Clint and winked one eye. He nodded a little to show he understood, and tensed his muscles.

Larissa twisted violently in Felks' grip, and the blaster swung in a short arc. Clint leaped toward the man, grabbing the gun arm. The blaster went off, searing the sky with its crackling beam. Then the cops jumped into the fray. Felks fell heavily to the ground, slamming his head against the hard steelite cement. He didn't move.

One of the cops bent over him for a moment. Then he stood up. In his palm was a little cup of transparent plastic. In its center there was a delicately tinted circle of green.

"He's a phony, all right, Miss Larissa," said the cop.

She nodded. "I—I see." She was clenching her teeth. "Give Mr. Conrad his fifty thousand back. And then you know what to do."

Clint took the sheaf of bills and pocketed them. Larissa turned to look at him. "You

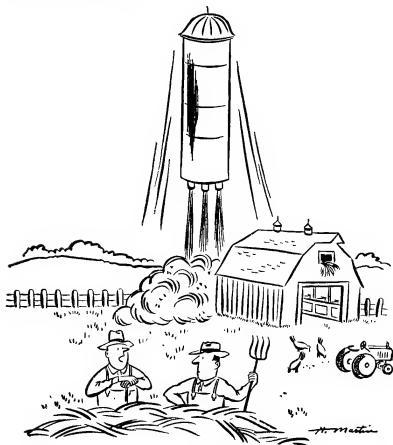
were right," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, I—" Clint broke off suddenly as he saw the tears half-formed, glistening in the corners of her eyes.

"He's dead," she said softly. "Cantelli's really dead."

And then Clint was comforting her as she sobbed on his chest. Over her shoulder, he watched the cops carry the unconscious Felks into their aircar. He didn't think Felks was going to enjoy the ride—not in the least.

THE END



"Is your son still fooling around with those rockets, Joe?"

THE REVOLVING FAN



by
ROGER DE SOTO

IF, BY the time you read this column you find the reviews a bit late, please place the onus where it belongs—on the hard work and confusion attendant upon issuing **AMAZING STORIES'** Thirtieth Anniversary Issue which, by the way, sold out completely on the stands.

Remember, however, that the faneditors who issue these 'zines put them out on more-or-less regular schedules. So if you can't get a back issue reviewed below, wait for the next...

* * *

FANTASTIC WORLDS. Vol. II, #4. Fall, '55. 411 W. 6th Street, Hays, Kansas. 30¢; 4/\$1. 39 pp.

In reading an issue such as this one of **FANTASTIC WORLDS**, the reviewer finds himself in something of a dilemma. Is this to be reviewed on a professional or fan level? **FANTASTIC WORLDS** attempts, like **FREIBERG'S MAGAZINE**, to be professional. In this it is as yet unsuccessful. Its price of 30¢ is too high. The general effect it creates is that of science fiction's "little" or *avante garde* magazine.

Well illustrated by such artists as Neil Austin and Naaman Peterson, with cover by Ralph Stapenhorst, the leadoff story, Bernard Kelly's "The Silent Writer" is an amateurish attempt at the eldritch effect, while Harold McKay's "Nucleonic Brakes" is of value only to demonstrate to the younger fans what the "gimmick" story of the Thirties was like. Stewart Kemble's "Revaluations; 2" is an interesting critique on writ-

ing; a poem by Garth Bentley, "Genus Homo" is technically proficient but emotionless; and Cornelia Jessey's "Put Out the Light" is only obscure. Book review section, "The Microscope," is handled competently by Messrs. Atheling, Jr., Leggat, Geo. O. Smith, and the editor.

* * *

FANTASY TIMES. Vol. X, #s 237, 238. Dec. '55, Jan. '56. Fandom House, P.O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, N.J. 10¢; 12/51. 6 pp.

There's no nonsense about FT: its avowed purpose is to give you the news about the science fiction professionals, and it does so. Leadoff story in the Dec. '55 issue is the news of the U.K.'s s-f editor Bert Campbell's replacement by E. C. Tuohy. FT covers AMAZING's Thirtieth Annivissue, and from LA comes a report of Forry Ackerman's 39th Birthday party.

In the Jan. '56 issue, lead story is news that Paul Fairman is back as Managing Editor of AMAZING, and followup of stories which appeared in the Thirtieth Annivissue. Departments by Arthur Jean Cox, Roger Dard, J. Harry Vincent, Donald E. Ford and Steve Takacs. Clean, clear, concise, competent, FANTASY-TIMES never loses its fascination to anyone who's really interested in the field.

* * *

SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW. #23. Oct.-Nov. '55. Richard E. Geis, 1525 N.E. Ainsworth, Portland 11, Ore. 15¢/7/51. 21 pp.

Under whatever name the editor publishes his 'zine, it always demonstrates the talents of an individual, offbeat mind. And in these days of hyperconformity, thank God for such minds, say I. An excellent demonstration: the "Monolog by the Editor," which covers everything from IF Mag, to sadism, to what's wrong with sf. Dick Geis, like the now-forgotten Brann the Iconoclast, knows how to use epithets which sizzle and sear. Henry Moskowitz attempts to ape his editor in "What IMAGINATION"—a discussion which replaces the snarl with a complaint. Harlan Ellison's "Up the Down Escalator" is, like most Ellisonia, crisp, pyrotechnic . . . and incomplete, both as to matter and emotion. This is a tale of the vengeance of conscience which demonstrates that when Harlan stops practicing

and starts writing, he'll be an author to watch. A review column by Noah McLeod and Jim Harmon, and an interesting department by Fred Chapell, "The Goldfish Bowl," close this issue.

* * *

ECLIPSE. Vol. II, #s 4, 5. Ray Thomson, 410 S. 4th Street, Norfolk, Nebraska. 10¢; 6/\$1. #13: 25 pp. #14: 31 pp.

Here is one fanzine which seems to have grown considerably since I last reviewed it, but which still has quite a way to go. Well mimeoed, profusely illustrated, EEK can't as yet compare with GRUE, HYPHEN, and the like—but then, what can?

Leadoff story in issue 13 is "Coming Race," by Terry Carr, an attempt at wry irony which is more ambitious than satisfying. Martin Graetz' "Dragon Island" reviews sf movies interestingly; fanzine column; letters; and a feeble (?) called "The Death of Corn."

* * *

JD. #22. Oct.-Nov. '55. Lynn A. Hickman, 200 N. Huron St., Albion, Michigan. 20¢; 6/\$1. 29 pp.

With this issue, Editor Hickman starts his sixth year of fan-publishing. As the ish evidences, JD will always have readers as long as there's S-E-X. Main item of interest is "Red, Hot and Hungry," by Hal Annas—a tale of what happened when a time traveller from 1995 met a girl from 2095 who was good enough to eat . . . Departments by the editor, Wilkie Conner, and Dick Ellington. Two poor poems by Jim Anderson and Jan Lindel.

* * *

HYPHEN. #15. Nov. '55. 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, North Ireland. 15¢. 44 pp.

Written and put together by Chuck Harris and Walt Willis, two Irishers with real wit, HYPHEN is almost always a joy to read and usually purveys a surprising amount of good information. F'rinstance: Damon Knight's Clevention report, now familiar to most fansubscribers, is followed by the same author's review of reviewers who reviewed his "Hell's Pave-

ment." Reaction: Uh. Bill Temple's "I Was Moved," is screamingly funny, as is John Berry's "High, Wide and Transom." Sadie Shaw joins the act in "Spades Are Trumpery." Deadpan, Chuck Harris goes berserk on the subject of time travel in his "... And Behold!" while Bob Shaw does a written fandango in the "Glass Bushel." A rationally irrational bombshell from the Emerald Isle which will turn most faneds green with envy.

* * *

EISFA. Vol. III, #12. Dec. '55. 407½ E. 6th St., North Manchester, Indiana. 5¢; 12/50¢. 19 pp.

Since the Indiana fans who publish this 'zine (under editors Robert and Juanita Coulson) are not interested in proving to anyone how important they are, how much they know, and how they can feed on shattered egos, this 'zine is refreshing, clear-eyed, and enjoyable.

After giving the editors their chance to say a few words, EISFA embarks into a funny bit entitled, "Private Past Meets The Spaceship Boys." An anecdote, "This . . . Is It!" by Murry Linestar (!) is engagingly in the same vein; and Thomas Stratton's movie review of "Snow Creature" doesn't take either itself or the movie very seriously. E. N. McNulty's japery, a letters column, and a strange but (so the editors swear) legit advertisement close this light-hearted effort.

* * *

PEON. #36. Dec. '55. Charles Lee Riddle, 108 Dunham St., Norwich, Conn. 20¢; 6/\$1. 30 pp.

Although more literate than many of the fanzines this reviewer has to read, PEON this issue is not up to the high standards the editor has set in the past. Perhaps the fault lies with the long story, "The Fall of Ygnarth," in which Lin Carter attempts a Lovecraft-Howard imitation without, however, the erudition of the one or the fierce conviction of the other. Eric Bentcliffe gives a Britisher's definition of pornography in the well-written "Lecher Session," but Jim Harmon's report on the Clevention in his column, "Harmony" is prosaic and undistinguished. Other features by such well-known names as Race Matthews, Dave Mason, Robert W. Lowndes, T. E. Watkins,

and the editor are, like the foregoing, very unevenly written. With its faults, however, PEON is still worth the price.

* * *

TACITUM. #6. Benny Sodek, 1432 Calhoun St., New Orleans, La. 10¢; 3/25¢. 21 pp.

Like many others of its ilk, TACITUM seems to be written for a small group of knowledgeable fans who probably roar with laughter at the editor's knowing japery. But to others not in the know, such ingrown esoterica leads to sundry shoulder shrugging, raised eyebrows, and the phrase, "So what?" Typical of this bent is "Dallard Declaration #3-C," in which Edmond Davison and Bob Carol make jokes about various fans and boon companions. If you've a desire to become one of the knowing few, this may be your meat. Otherwise . . . unh-uh.

* * *

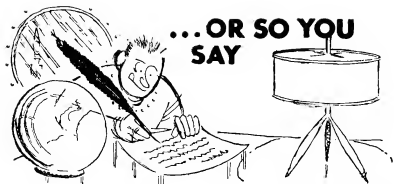
INFINITY. #3. Oct., '55. Charles Harris, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Penna. 15¢. 38 pp.

That this fanzine is a labor of love is evident from the great care with which it has been mimeoed, hectoed, and assembled. Contents, while uneven, are well organized—with one exception. That is Sam Moskowitz' "The Great Brain Wash," which exposes the same schizoid maunderings which make the writer such a colossal bore. Calvin Beck, in writing overprofusely anent some autobiographical material, nevertheless has some interesting reports on s-f of the recent past, spoiled for me, however, by some self-conscious humor. Editor Harris' "From Here to Infinity" is the *Ave atque Vale* (this is INFINITY's last issue) which recounts how he got into fandom; a page of verse is pleasant but puerile; short-short stories by Harlan Ellison, David Brehm, Harris and Donald Cantin, and by Saul Kitchener are interesting and near-professional. Letters dept. and editor's notes. We'll miss INFY—an unassumingly pleasant fanzine.

* * *

Well, that's all from here . . . see you in two issues, if you continue to send me your 'zines for review.

...OR SO YOU SAY



BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

Thanks for your out-of-this-world 30th Anniversary issue of **AMAZING STORIES**. And take it from an old time fan that it remains the best single issue of an s-f magazine we've had in at least seven or eight years, and undoubtedly one of the best of all time. Even several writers etc. who usually have done anything but entertain in the past were in excellent form.

Despite the fact that most of the material was already selected and used years and years ago, you did an extraordinary job and displayed excellent editorial acumen for having selected as fine and as diversified a cross-section of material as this. Bravo, Professor Browne!

However, with this 30th Anniversary issue one outstanding and perhaps saddening factor came to the fore: that there is much to be desired in the average or so-called "above average" s-f magazine of today. The overall quality of your Anniversary issue, while not exactly quite typical of s-f of former years, is all the same lucidly indicative of how badly the field has suffered. And all this despite that there are now only some 13 or 14 s-f magazine titles extant compared to 38 that were circulating even less than three years ago. (Imagine—the magazine field is now just one-third of its original size during its all time high! Seems ironic and also hard to believe.)

While some of the blame has fallen on TV for having theoretically absorbed more of the masses' spare time than any other diversion has heretofore, a lot of it actually is exaggeration. The mere fact that statistics prove the public is buying

more books, magazines, etc., and reading *more* is self explanatory. Also, regardless how much s-f's suffered, there *are* more magazines of various types than ever. So, I think the problem is just this: 1) S-F has lagged behind, while the times have not, but caught up and even gone further; 2) editors have not done enough to encourage "new faces," and I speak from my own first-hand experiences as an editor, instead they lean too heavily on worn out and so-called "reliable" hacks and/or "old timers" or both; and 3) let's just say that the infectious germ of a mad and irritating mass production age has infiltrated, with all its tinny hollowness and lack of feeling, into not only others but our own ranks.

Anyhow, thanks for the 30th Anniversary issue again as it's aroused lots of old memories and many new ideas—or at least instilled within my mind enough incentive to take up pen and paper to cut loose about s-f magazines, something I've been doing too infrequently each passing year.

Calvin T. Beck
Box 497
Hackensack, N. J.

• The point you bring up of old stories being better than the modern crop is an interesting one and has been brought up before. We don't agree on this at all. While seeking material for the Anniversary Issue, we came upon a lot of material that would not meet today's editorial standards in any science fiction magazine. You must remember that the stories in the Anniversary Issue were what we considered the cream of thirty years of publishing. Happily, most readers agreed with us. Of course there was much more excellent material in those old books—and there was a lot incredibly bad by today's standards. Then too, there is nostalgia to be considered. Many stories read in one's youth wear halos that vanish under adult scrutiny.

It's a point that can be argued interminably pro and con, but one thing is certain. The Anniversary Issue was a tremendous success.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

The 30th Anniversary issue of AMAZING STORIES was superlative. The artwork was masterful, the predictions spell-

binding, the stories themselves classics, and the overall issue the finest ever published by you. BUT . . . (there's always a "but", isn't there?) How about that story, "The Day Time Stopped Moving"? In the story, everything was frozen but people, and dogs who were passing from life to death. *Everything* else was frozen. Then how did the hero move? Wouldn't his clothes be frozen? Wouldn't he be trapped in them? How about Rover, there? Shouldn't he be chained to his collar? Was the collar passing from life to death too? And it says smoke was immobile, not stirring. (Check me.) If smoke doesn't move, air wouldn't either, would it? How do you breathe solid air? With a sledge hammer? (Nope, sledge hammer frozen too.) I could go on, but while I'm writing, I'd like to give a pet theory of mine. Time travel is impossible. It will never be invented, at least, not on Earth. Proof? If it was, wouldn't we be visited by people of the future?

However, I enjoyed your issue tremendously, except for the above story.

Roger Ebert
410 E. Washington St.
Urbana, Illinois

• *Your points on "The Day Time Stopped Moving" are well taken, but let's look at it this way. The author had a crackerjack idea for a story and handled it the best way he knew how which was, all in all, pretty good. Science-fiction is read, we believe, to be enjoyed rather than analyzed. The highly analytical could take any fine science-fiction story of—say a man going to Saturn in a space ship. Regardless of how good the story was, the more discerning reader could say: "Now look here—we all know this man couldn't possibly have got as far as Saturn in that ship, don't we?" The thing to do, Mr. Ebert, is just believe—and have fun.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

From one who has read AMAZING STORIES starting with the very first issue in the twenties, in the main it has always been a fine magazine. Keep up the good work.

On the readers letter section I do have a complaint. Several times on seeing a name and address in my area I have gone to call on some of the people who are interested in the same thing

I am. At the address given I find they are either unknown or non-existent. If a person sits down and writes a letter why should they be ashamed to give their right name and/or address?

Maurice Powell
P. O. Box 3063
Temescal Sta.
Oakland 9, Calif.

• *It is strange indeed that people seeking print in a letter column would use fictitious names and addresses. If the letters we receive are interesting and appear to be sincere, we have no recourse but to accept them on good faith and publish them. We feel, however, that such cases are very rare and that you have been unfortunate in your attempted contacts. Better luck in the future!—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Congratulations on your third decade of AMAZING! I would like to say that I would gladly pay \$.50 a copy if you keep AMAZING STORIES in the big size. After all the large size contains twice as much reading material for so little extra. I think your magazine is one of the best.

Jimmy Dulicai
423 Orchard St.
Cranford, N. J.

• *You are indeed one of the stalwarts, Mr. Dulicai. Would that there were more like you. We feel also that our readers would be willing to pay fifty cents for a larger magazine. But our circulation department is not inclined to agree with us on that point.—ED.*

Dear Editor:

After reading the letters-to-the-editors in several of the leading S-F magazines for the past few years I have come to the belief that this would be a very drab world if we all had the same feelings and the same liking for stories. This old globe would no longer hold anything worthwhile for humans in general. Therefore I hold that everyone, when commenting on the efforts of someone else's work, should say only that

which they have actual knowledge of, or offer some kind of constructive criticism, or none at all. But there I go doing exactly what I disapprove of—well, let it pass at that.

Could you tell me just how many of the authors are really in the science field? Also is there any effort made by the scientists to work on some of the dreams of these writers? Seems to me that there would be a gold mine in some of the things that are brought out in these stories. It is said that the layman can see what the master cannot for his intellect. This is something that has been needling me for some time. I would be much more at ease if I could feel that it actually has high value. Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy reading for the sake of reading, but would like to know if the brains of this great country do anything about some of the things that are available to them through some of the folks from the other walks of life.

Sorry that I cannot afford to take out a subscription, but I do buy as many of the s-f magazines as I possibly can. Maybe someday I will be able to get all of them.

After reading the March issue of "The Scarlet Saint" all I can say is *Boy!* You have me for some time. Now I know there will be some who will not care for it, but to each his own, and let the other guy have his share also.

No need to tell you to keep up the good work and don't let the folks get you down with their ornery words.

Darrell G. Raymond, BM2
Naval Career Appraisal Team
Staff COM. CRU. DES.
PAC. REP.
Navy 128
Pearl Harbor, T.H.

• *Perhaps, Darrell, the answer to your big question lies in this direction: No doubt science-fiction writers and scientists look into the future and see the same things. But they are bound by different rules. The science-fiction writer can rocket ahead on the wings of his imagination and a good story structure. But the scientist, no matter how great his imagination, is earthbound by the stern rules of reality. One of our authors foresaw and wrote about the atom bomb way back in the Twenties. He had only to sit at his typewriter and explode the thing within the structure of a fiction story. The scientist's*

chore was a little more difficult. Through imagination, drudgery, and genius, he had to explode it right in the faces of all Earth's population. And he did it. The void between mental concept and actual creation is vast and the scientist bridges it—not the fiction writer.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Congratulations. Your 30th Anniversary issue of AMAZING STORIES was excellent.

Thirty years of leading the science-fiction field is something to be more than proud of. I know I will see AMAZING STORIES around in the year of 2000.

W. C. Brandt

Apt.—N, 1725 Seminary Ave.

Oakland 21, Calif.

• Thank you. As a matter of fact, we expect to be putting out a Martian edition in the year 2100. But probably with a different editorial staff.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

You really asked for it, didn't you? Well—set your mind at rest on one point—I got more than my money's worth out of it—and on these alone: "John Jones's Dollar," "Wacky World," "The Rat Racket," "The Sword and the Atopen" (that last the best of them all.) The longer "Wanted—7 Fearless Engineers" is perfect, being the adventure s-f that launched the stuff, and is still made to order for many readers. I think more of this sort would restore your ranks to the numbers they once attained. Not highbrow, not metaphysical, not psychic ruminations of a bent brain—just very good s-f, accent on both s and f. Wonder if you know how many people like to read this type of story—and still would if they could get it any more?

One curious point seems to come out of your selection of so many way-back items: the realization that since W.W. II people are a lot more phlegmatic. We aren't overcome with terror of the unknown any more, less apt to panic, and the sheer horror that many characters of the 30's were supposed to feel seems a bit childish in the light of what has come to be—shall we say, commonplace—such little gadgets as H bombs. Even Asimov had his characters overcome with horror and

fleeing like mad from—what?—a tin man gone nuts. I doubt he'd stop traffic in Times Square if he landed there today.

Why do they always portray an atom with its little satellites flitting around in non-concentric orbits? Your cover shows it thus. Seems to me it would be more realistic (but harder for the artist of course) if they were spread out in a flatter plane. Just a theory, that is.

Are you mad at J. J. Millard? You left him out of the contents page.

Finally, who is Sam Moskowitz? He did a nice summation job there, but most s-f fans are apt to regard as "Mr. S-F" your final presentation's author, Robert Heinlein. And he lived up to his awesome reputation here, too.

P. H. Scheller
117 East 31st St.
New York 16, N. Y.

• *Several people sprang to J. J. Millard's defense. We did not mean to slight the very able gentleman, but back in those old issues, only fiction rated the contents page. Pieces such as Vanished Civilizations were considered "filler" material and the writers were lucky to get a by-line on their lead page. However, we should not have stuck so close to the ancient customs and should have given Mr. Millard the recognition his fine piece deserves. We ask his forgiveness, wherever he may be. We ask yours also, Mr. Scheller.—ED.*

Dear Editors:

Yesterday was double-feature day in my mailbox, for I received both the Anniversary AMAZING and a very slim by comparison FANTASTIC. You will undoubtedly receive many more letters from the fans on this particular issue than you would on three ordinary ones, and justly so. I've read the FANTASTIC and a good deal of the AMAZING, so will now get down to the "Why don't you? . . ." department.

First of all, I'd like to go on record as favoring the smaller size type used in the Anniversary issue. Take a look and you'll note that you have one novelette and four short stories (five if you count the space used by the article written by Millard which for some reason did not make the contents page) with 24 pages to spare. This is almost one-third more reading ma-

terial than you have in your regulars. The type is not hard to read either, and some of the other s-f magazines use this size. Using this size type you could give us longer stories or if this would not be financially feasible, include a "classic" from AMAZING's past each issue. I don't mind re-reading some of the older stories, there are a great many that I never read, and I'm sure the younger fans would not object to such a policy.

Also, I think an Anniversary issue every year would be a wonderful idea, with the longer novelettes getting the nod next time. Some of those by Burroughs, Wilcox, and others that are not too dated.

Thanks for a wonderful issue.

Herbert E. Beach
210 West Paquin
Waterville, Minn.

• Thank you for the very wonderful suggestions, Mr. Beach. We do not know, at this writing, whether they are feasible or not, but we will certainly give them a lot of thought and analysis. The publishing business is one of many facets and all ideas move slowly through the mill.—ED.

Dear Ed:

Science Fiction has now been incorporated in the State of New York under the name: "World Science Fiction Society Inc." Interested fans should send \$2.00 to Post Office Box 272, Radio City Station, New York 19, N. Y. This membership corporation will sponsor the annual World Science Fiction Conventions, the next of which will be held Aug. 30-Sept. 3, 1956. Interested fans should send \$2.00 to Post Office Box 272, Radio City Station, New York 19, N. Y. for membership.

George Nims Raybin
401 Broadway
New York 17, N. Y.



side the fabulous genie of modern science. Almost every facet of early imaginings has been rendered feeble by the sweep of reality. Even the Forty Thieves were pilfering bums compared to some of the robber barons of this modern age.

But let's not dwell on the sad aspects. Let us, instead, look down at the wing-shadows passing over those old wagon tracks and wonder about tomorrow and the greater shadows to come. Another hundred years, and the DC-6 becomes an ancient and honorable relic of a quaint and bygone day. What wonders lie ahead to rise up and render it so?

Or have we moved too fast? The progress of the last hundred years has dwarfed that of the previous five thousand. Certain wise and thoughtful men do not like this. They cite laws of action and reaction and warn of progress too rapid to be assimilated. They tell of ancient civilizations, steeped in pride and arrogance, buried now, beneath the deserts of the world.

Others, no less respected, scoff at these fears and warnings. They look upon past ages as a vast and solid foundation from which Mankind has finally risen, never to return. And their arguments make sense. It is difficult to visualize all this that we have become as a passing phase of cosmic creation destined to collapse and be forgotten. If oblivion is to be our destiny, it seems more realistic to believe we will wreck the stage in our passing and take the theater with us.

No doubt the key to destiny lies within Man himself and he should listen to the counsel of those who remind him that the old values and concepts remain ever constant in this volatile and changing world. This is almost universally recognized. Proof lies in the tremendous sale of inspirational books and literature; in renewed and ever-greatening religious trends; in clear indication that Man is soberly pondering his personal responsibility in relation to this wonderful new world. And therein must lie our salvation. To quote Kipling:

*The tumult and the shouting dies,
The captains and the kings depart.
Still stands thine ancient sacrifice
An humble and a contrite heart . . .*

PWF

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